5-2016

Terrorism Turnover: An Assessment of Radicalized Extremism from Al Qaeda to the Islamic State

Zachary R. Schwermann
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uark.edu/arscdeanuht

Part of the International Relations Commons, and the Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Schwermann, Zachary R., "Terrorism Turnover: An Assessment of Radicalized Extremism from Al Qaeda to the Islamic State" (2016). Arts and Sciences Dean's Office Undergraduate Honors Theses. 2.
http://scholarworks.uark.edu/arscdeanuht/2

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Office at ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts and Sciences Dean's Office Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu, ccmiddle@uark.edu.
Terrorism Turnover:
A Historic and Spatial Assessment of Radicalized Islamic Extremism from Al Qaeda to the Islamic State

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors Studies in Middle East Studies

By
Zachary Schwermann

2016
Middle East Studies
J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences
The University of Arkansas
Table of Contents

I: Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 4
II: The Beginning ............................................................................................................................................... 12
III: Al Qaeda Central ......................................................................................................................................... 26
IV: Al Qaeda in Iraq .......................................................................................................................................... 44
V: The Islamic State .......................................................................................................................................... 55
VI: Partitioning Implications ......................................................................................................................... 89
VII: Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................ 106
VIII: Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................... 109
IX: Appendix ................................................................................................................................................... 116

Figures

1.1 Sykes-Picot Agreement Map .................................................................................................................... 6
1.2 Combined Partitioning Map (Iraq and Syria) ............................................................................................ 9
2.1 Extremity of Beliefs Diagram .................................................................................................................. 14
2.2 Number of Salafi-Jihadists by Year, 1988-2013 ..................................................................................... 16
2.3 Tal Abyad Classroom Photo 1 .................................................................................................................. 20
2.4 Tal Abyad Classroom Photo 2 .................................................................................................................. 21
3.1 U.S. Embassy Bombings .......................................................................................................................... 33
3.2 USS Cole Bombing ................................................................................................................................... 35
3.3 September 11th, World Trade Center Attacks .......................................................................................... 37
3.4 Al Qaeda Organizational Structure: Hierarchical .................................................................................. 39
3.5 Al Qaeda Organizational Structure: Organic .......................................................................................... 41
4.1 Civilian Casualties in Iraq, 2003–November 2013 ................................................................................. 53
5.1 The Islamic State Flag ................................................................................................................................ 60
5.2 ISIS Sanctuary: December 5, 2014 ............................................................................................................. 73
5.3 Islamic State Organizational Structure: Hierarchical ........................................ 77
5.4 Tal Abyad Central Square .................................................................................. 79
5.5 Operation Inherent Resolve: Targets Damaged/Destroyed ................................. 85
5.6 Islamic State Territorial Gains & Losses between 1 January 2015 & 14 March 2016 86
6.1 Former Yugoslav Federation Map ...................................................................... 90
6.2 Iraq Partitioning Map ........................................................................................ 96
6.3 Syria Partitioning Map ...................................................................................... 100
6.4 Combined Partitioning Map (Iraq and Syria) ....................................................... 102
6.1 Coalition Troop Strength in Iraq Since May 2003 ............................................... 116
6.2 Tal Abyad Beheading Block ................................................................................ 117
6.3 Tal Abyad, Church of the Cross (Outside) .......................................................... 118
6.4 Tal Abyad, Church of the Cross (Inside) ............................................................ 119
6.5 The Messy Political Mosaic in Syria .................................................................. 120
6.6 Islamic State’s Cash Flow ................................................................................... 121
6.7 ISIS Report on Aleppo Province ......................................................................... 122
6.8 Captured ISIS Advanced Anti-Tank Weapons ................................................... 123
6.9 Captured ISIS Rockets ....................................................................................... 124
6.10 Captured ISIS Vehicles .................................................................................... 125
I: Introduction

“Rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for Syrians, and Iraq is not for Iraqis. The earth is Allah’s. The State is a state for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims, all the Muslims. O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory” (“Latest Articles” 2014).

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader and quasi-anointed caliph of the Islamic State, proclaimed these bold statements during a speech on June 28, 2014, when he self-declared the establishment of a new Islamic Caliphate. It was a declaration half a century in the making and was something that not even Osama bin Laden, nicknamed The Sheikh of radicalized Islamic extremism, had ever accomplished. Somewhat astonishingly enough, it came from a group that almost six months earlier had been alluded to as a “jayvee team” by the President of the United States (Remnick 2014). Then, as if out of thin air, they dashed across Eastern Syria and Western Iraq in blitzkrieg fashion. Except, the Islamic State did not magically appear out of thin air as a seemingly unstoppable force, but in fact, the seeds that would become the Islamic State were sown in Afghanistan’s third largest city, Herat, all of the way back in 1999. It happened as a stroke of charity, when Osama bin Laden granted the eventually infamous Abu Musab al-Zarqawi a small loan, so he could set up a training camp in Herat for a new jihadist organization, Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad ([JTWJ] Organization of Monotheism and Jihad) (Warrick 67). JTWJ would later leave Herat for Iraq’s northeastern mountains after the beginning of the U.S.’s bombardment of Afghanistan, following 9/11 (Warrick 69). Despite being the recipient of the reparatory loan from bin Laden, Zarqawi did not officially pledge bayah (allegiance) to bin Laden and his organization, Al Qaeda, until 2004, a year after he moved to Iraq(Stern et al 21). Once aligned as an official branch of Al Qaeda, JTWJ became Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI would eventually morph into what has now become the self-proclaimed caliphate of the Islamic State. However, the founding of JTWJ is not the furthest lineage point for the Islamic State. Instead, the lineage of the Islamic State, through its
ideological influences, can be traced back to the original Islamist scholars, like Sayyid Qutb. Specifically with Qutb, his Qutbism ideologies are looked at as the premier, primordial ideologies of radicalized, Islamism and they are a major influence for many of the ideologies that the Islamic State believes in today. This paper will follow this complicated and winding lineage from these early Islamists up to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in order to show how many of the original grievances and goals of Islamists, laid out in the early 19th century, are still influencing today’s radicalized, Islamist jihadists.

Most crises and the grievances that fuel them have a singular point of inception. For the Middle East and its plethora of divisive and violent situations, this point was the ratification of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The Sykes-Picot Agreement and its Western, egotistically drawn lines helped create the problems we have today by ignoring the organic, tribal lines that the region had previously followed for centuries. Instead, it grouped many tribal, ethnic, and religious groups, who previously had never been associated, together into various nations. These lines are depicted in Figure 1.1. As could be expected, this led to tensions as tribes who had previously been rivals were now countrymen (Osman 2013). Then, with numerous ethnic and religious groups clumped together in each country, many of which were minority groups like the Yazidis, not every group’s opinions could be heard, which fueled the animosity between them. This animosity was advantageous to Islamist extremist groups who claimed to be sympathetic of and fighting for the rights of the alienated and suppressed ethnic and religious groups. The extremist groups also provided these ethnic groups with an outlet to let out their frustrations through and thus, through the manipulation of peoples’ anger, the extremist organizations were able to grow into formidable forces that have continuously wreaked havoc on the region. Another outlet that some groups, particularly the Kurds, pursued, to deal with their suppressive situations, were bids for secession from the nations created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement ("Ever Closer to Independence" 2015). Overtime, these bids were largely ignored for being impractical or unnecessary risks of upsetting the
Figure 1.1 depicts the lines drawn by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The often straight lines ignored the organic, tribal, ethnic, and religious lines that had existed in the region for centuries. Source: ("Sykes-Picot Agreement" 2016)

balance of the Middle East. Now, incidentally coming up on the one hundredth anniversary of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, it could be time to address these bids as legitimate attempts to bring peace to the region. Secession though is not the appropriate terminology for this situation; instead, partition is. This is because the redistributing of land would occur as an active part of the solution process following the termination of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, instead of as an individual act of secession. For
inspiration on how to successfully partition a country, we can look northeast of Syria and Iraq to the Balkan region, where a similar sectarian conflict took place in the 1990s.

The imitation of history is a regrettable, yet prevailing theme throughout the world. While the connections are not always easily discernible, they are indeed there. As previously stated, the current conflicts in Iraq and Syria can be looked at as imitations of the 1990’s Balkan conflicts. This can be seen through an excerpt from the book, *Balkan Ghosts*: “The war in Bosnia was brought about not by ethnic hatreds as much as it was by evil men, and it could have been stopped at any point along the way” (Kaplan XX). Replace Bosnia with Syria or Iraq and there would be no way of telling if this sentence came from a book published in 1993 or 2015. This duplication is dismal and alarming, but we can use the lessons of the Balkan conflict’s horrors and the success of its solution, to help formulate a solution for the conflict occurring today in the Middle East. The Bosnian war was a subset of the overarching conflict that was the breaking up of the former country of Yugoslavia, which was in the Balkan region. Similar to situations in the Middle East, Yugoslavia consisted of multiple ethnic/religious groups that were held together by a man many considered to be an authoritarian dictator, Josip Broz Tito (Andjelic 36). Then, just as in Iraq and Syria, when this unifying leader fell, the divisions in the population vied with one another for power, leading to scarring and destructive sectarian violence that eventually escalated into a full scale war. Now, the area that was once classified as Yugoslavia contains the six, independent nations of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia, and the Republic of Macedonia. This outcome can be looked at as a model for the bitterly divided nations of Iraq and Syria, each of which has multiple ethnic groups with large populations. Additionally, each country has dealt with long and deadly crises that have left deep sectarian scars. Therefore, as a possible solution to this divisiveness, I am advocating the splitting of both Iraq and Syria into three, smaller independent countries. Each of these smaller countries will then contain a majority of one of the three largest ethnic and/or religious groups of the original country their land came from. A primitive
description of the partitioning of Iraq, as pictured in Figure 1.2, would be that: the Shi‘ite Arab region would encompass the southeastern portion, neighboring Kuwait and Iran and include Iraq’s current capital city of Baghdad, the Sunni Arab region would encompass the western portion, including the city of Mosul and bordering Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, and the Kurdish portion would encompass the northern portions neighboring Syria, Turkey, and Iran, while still containing the current Kurdish capital of Erbil. In Syria, also shown in Figure 1.2, the partitioning would take place as such: the Alawites would gain control of a small, western sector neighboring the Mediterranean Sea and including the city of Latakia, the Sunni Arabs would gain the majority of the southern portion of Syria, up to just past the city of Aleppo, and the Kurds would obtain the rest of the northern and northeastern section, bordering Turkey and Iraq. With the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish states bordering one another, the hope is that the two would combine to form a united Kurdistan. Additionally, it is the hope that the two new Sunni Arab states would follow the same path as the Kurds and unite to form one large state. Once partitioned, international law would help stabilize the area by making it harder for the former countrymen to attack one another. International law would do this because now, if one group attacked another it would no longer be considered domestic, sectarian violence amongst the citizens of one country, but instead a breach of a nation’s sovereignty.

While international laws would help solidify the new countries, getting complete international recognition for them would be harder to come by. The U.S. allies of Saudi Arabia and Turkey would be two of the states wary about the new countries. Saudi Arabia would likely contest an independent Shi‘ite Arab state out of a fear of an extension of Iran’s influence. To help quell these fears, an agreement to not extend the Shi‘ite Arab state to Saudi Arabia’s border could be made, in order to distance Iran’s expected influence. Additionally, the U.S. could broker a deal to give Saudi Arabia clearance to openly and fully back the new Sunni Arab state, both militarily and economically, which is something they are currently being limited from doing with the Sunni rebels in Syria. By allowing Saudi
Figure 1.2 is a map of a hypothetical partitioning of Iraq and Syria. In Chapter VI, Partitioning Solution, this map, as well as others, will be discussed and critiqued further. 
Source: (Zemer, 2014)

Arabia to openly back the new Sunni Arab state would give them a public counter to the likely advance of Iranian influence into the Shi’ite Arab state. Turkey would also likely contest the breakup of Iraq and Syria, out of fear that a completely independent Kurdish nation could ignite an internal revolution from its own Kurdish population. One way that the U.S. could help quell these fears is by providing aid to Turkey to help in the relocation of Turkish Kurds, who voluntarily want to move to the new Kurdistan. The U.S. should also back the Turkish government in its fight against militant Kurdish PKK fighters who try to undermine the Turkish government. In fact, the PKK is already a designated foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department (Bureau of Counterterrorism 2015). By appeasing these
weary allies and any other countries that have their doubts, I believe that their approval can be obtained, which would pay enormous dividends towards helping the partitioning plan succeed.

It is the opinion of this paper that too many times in history, has the world said “never again” and then ‘again’ has happened. Through the analysis of past mistakes that led to the rise of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, this paper will provide suggestions intended to aid in the formulation of a long term solution to inhibit the rise of another, nefarious organization in either Iraq or Syria. To do this, this paper will present four main case studies from the results of research conducted using distinguished publications, government reports and studies, media documents, and archival materials. The first case study will focus on the beginning of radicalized, Islamic extremist thinking, by looking at Islamist scholars like Sayyid Qutb. The second case study will focus on the creation of Al Qaeda Central and its path to executing the attacks on 9/11. The third case study will cover Al Qaeda’s retreat underground following the U.S.’s response to 9/11 and then Al Qaeda’s establishment of an Iraqi affiliate, AQI. Lastly, the fourth case study will focus on how Al Qaeda in Iraq went from nearly being completely expunged during the Anbar Awakening to being the current, brutally dominant organization, the Islamic State. Together, these case studies will present a comprehensive and in depth analysis of how the Islamic State grew out of the shell of Al Qaeda and how the tumultuous crises in Iraq and Syria aided in the growth of the Islamic State. The analyses from each of the four case studies will then be used to formulate an implication to partition the land designated as the current countries of Iraq and Syria into multiple, smaller countries that specifically identify with one of the major ethnic/religious groups in Iraq and Syria. At nearly one hundred years old, the Sykes-Picot Agreement and its influence has run its course, as death and destruction, instead of peace and prosperity have become commonplace. As Aziz Ahmad, of the Kurdistan Regional Security Council, once said, “there’s a reason the map was drawn in pencil” (Ahmad 2016). This implication thus intends to take full advantage of the ephemerality of that pencil, to recreate a more peaceful grouping of Middle East nations. In the end, I believe that the partitioning of
Iraq and Syria will help reverse the current commonality of death and destruction by bringing lasting peace to a region that has not experienced tranquility in this century.
II: The Beginning

Sayyid Qutb once said that,

“Islam is not merely a ‘belief’, Islam is a declaration of the freedom of man from servitude to other men. Thus it strives from the beginning to abolish all those systems and governments which are based on the rule of man over men” (Wright 125).

Later on Qutb would say that true Islam and thus true freedom cannot be experienced until the jahiliyya (ignorance in reference to the age of pre-Islamic times) was fully eliminated and true Shari’ah law was imposed. This was one of the first calls by Sayyid Qutb, an author, educator, and one of the fathers of radicalized, Islamism. However, Qutb was not always so radical. To understand how Qutb came to believe in this pernicious distortion of the religion and why he broadcasted it, one must go back to what caused him to initially develop these extremist views. Sayyid Qutb’s hate blossomed after he was sent to America in 1948, after his popular, nationalistic and semi-fundamentalist writings had gotten him in hot water with the Egyptian government. To his friends that helped orchestrate the trip, the hope was that studying in America would reverse these views, but to their bane, as well as the many victims of his radicalized influence now, this was not the case. Despite his initial ire with the Egyptian government, Qutb’s views of the West were not always so malevolent. It is said that his “biographical sketches suggest that [he] arrived with a benign view of America, but if that’s true it didn’t last long” (Von Drehle 2006). His post-trip writings suggest that his American experience had turned his initial semi-fundamentalist views into full-blown radicalized, extremist views and he was now on a mission to spread these newfound beliefs across the Arab world. While hoping to ignite a revolution against the Western puppets that so heavily influenced many the Middle East’s governments, little did he know, but his writings would eventually help influence the creation of some of the world’s deadliest and most successful terrorist organizations. This case study will address Sayyid Qutb’s role in the beginning of radicalized, Islamic thinking and its later ties to Salafist Islam. It will also focus on Qutb’s connection to
the original founders of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Eventually, Qutb’s influence reached the likes of the Islamic State’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; thus completing the long and twisted path from a single man’s grievances in 1948 to today’s deadliest terrorist organization.

Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are both self-declared Salafist Jihadist organizations; however they take many of the traditional Salafist ideologies and skew them to support their actions. In the big picture of the Islamic faith, both Salafism and Jihadism are subsets of the Sunni sect of Islam and are considered to be more extreme in their views than typical Sunni Islam, as is exemplified in Figure 2.1. Additionally, Islamism is the interpretation of Sunni Islam that scholars like Sayyid Qutb and his predecessors, such as Sayyid Abu’l A’la Mawdudi and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, adhered to. As an ideology, Islamists believe that all Muslims should practice their faith as the Prophet Muhammad and his followers did when Islam first began. This is because they believe that during this time period, Muslims practiced the purest form of Islam and as time has progressed, the *ummah* (Islamic community) has strayed from the true practice of Islam. Many Islamists believe that the West’s influence on the world, like *bida* (innovations), is the main culprit tainting Islamic practices and causing Muslims to stray from their faith. They also believe that Islamic Law, also known as Sharia Law, should be the basis by which governments govern their adherents. However, they believe that the entirety of the *ummah* should be connected and ruled as one. These beliefs of Islamic unity throughout the world directly clash with the ideology of nationalism, which supports the idea of individual states and does not condemn breaking up the *ummah*. This also means that certain Islamists advocate for an Islamic state, however to a less extreme and violent sense than the group, the Islamic State imagines it as. In fact, many Islamists identify themselves as being non-violent and strive to bring about changes through peaceful processes. However, the stricter, certain Islamists are in their Quranic interpretations, the closer they become to falling into the realms of Salafism. Salafism is, in essence, an even stricter interpretation of Islam than
Figure 2.1 is a visual representation of the differing levels of extremity of beliefs in the Islamic faith. The most extreme and hardline with their beliefs are the radicalized Jihadists, depicted by the smallest and lightest colored circle, and then the least extreme is the general population of Muslims throughout the world. The diagram also represents the differing following sizes of each group, with there being significantly more Muslims who follow the traditional, common faith, than there are classified as radicalized jihadist extremists. 
Source: (Brown 2016)

Islamism is, especially in regards to the implementation of Sharia Law. Salafism comes from the Arabic root, Salaf, which means either ‘forefather’ or ‘predecessor’ and is in reference to the earliest converts to Islam and their unblemished practice of the faith under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad. Salafists also believe more in the idea of tawhid (oneness) in all aspects of Islamic thought and practice, meaning that they immensely revere each individual’s personal connection with God. Therefore, Salafists too, reject any bida and are adamantly against Western influences on Islamic nations.
Specifically, they believe that any interpretation that is not verifiably and directly related to the Prophet or does not come from the Quran is unjust. Because of this, they believe that anyone who follows these unjust interpretations or does not equally believe in their ideologies are *kuffar* (apostates/non-believers). Now, all Salafists do not believe that these *kuffar* should immediately be killed and most do adhere to a more Quietist Salafism interpretation that does not advocate violence. The subset that does advocate violence falls into the Jihadist Salafism realm, along with the organizations of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. An example of which can be seen with the current leader of Al Qaeda, Ayman al Zawahiri, who openly believes that anyone or any group of people who renounce the act of jihad are betraying the Islamic faith and deserve death as a punishment (Bukay 2006). Salafism though has no official leaders, which allows for a wide spectrum of beliefs under its umbrella classification. The wide spectrum and lack of centralization allows radicalized scholars and self-proclaimed experts, like many of the leaders of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, to more easily preach their materials and gain followers (Stern et al 269). Additionally, the rise in social media has allowed these leaders to reach more potential followers much more easily and as can be seen in Figure 2.2, the amount of radicalized jihadist Salafists around the world is continuously on the rise; many of which are influenced by ideologies first placed forth by Sayyid Qutb and his predecessors (Jones 27).

Sayyid Qutb was by no means the first Islamist scholar to become radicalized nor was he the first to believe in many of the ideologies he advocated. However, he might be one of, if not the most famous Islamist scholar for his multiple citations as the scholar who helped influence the leaders of Al Qaeda. While Qutb’s writings of his beliefs were eventually infamous across the world, he began as an Islamist after being influenced by the writings of Indo-Pakistani Islamic scholar, Sayyid Abu’l A’la Mawdudi. Mawdudi was another prominent 20th century Islamist scholar who explicitly “believed that much of the Muslim world was ruled and inhabited by nonbelievers and that devout Muslims were obligated to change these circumstances” (Stern et al 271). In essence, Mawdudi believed in the idea
Figure 2.2 is a visual representation of both the low and high estimates of the number of Salafi-Jihadist fighters worldwide, up to 2013. One hypothesis for the large uptick after the turn of the 21st century is the launch of social media, which allowed more followers to be reached in a shorter amount of time. Source: (Jones 27)

that the world, at that time, was experiencing another period of jahiliyya, which is something Qutb would later agree with and build off of. Particularly troubling to Mawdudi, Qutb, and many other Islamist scholars was that in the past, the Muslim world was the envy of the Western world, by being the center of scientific, philosophical, and medicinal innovation. Regarding this area of thinking both Mawdudi and Qutb were influenced by the writings of the 19th century Islamist scholar, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Afghani believed that Islam “was a superior civilization because the intellectual foundations upon which the West was built had in fact been borrowed from Islam. Ideals such as social egalitarianism, popular sovereignty, and the pursuit and preservation of knowledge had their origins not in Christian Europe, but in the ummah (Islamic community)” (Aslan 142). This time period was known
as the *Islamic Golden Age* and was centered on the Abbasid Caliphate’s capital of Baghdad and its support of the House of Wisdom. As is the recurring trend of all great, world powers, the Abbasid Caliphate’s reign would end, as would the *Islamic Golden Age* when the region was overrun by more powerful forces. Following this fall from grandeur, Islam as a religion and as a subset of the enveloping Arab culture, would never again, at least up to present day, obtain a similar position of prestige as rulers or chief innovators. Mawdudi believed that Islam had still not recovered in modern times because of the fact that the *ummah* “had strayed from the true path of Islam and allowed local distortions, innovations, and undue reliance on stagnant scholarship to corrupt their [the *ummah*] faith” (Mandaville 81). Additionally, he felt that the West’s influence on the Middle East and other Muslim majority states was fueling this digression from the true faith. Therefore he believed that these influences had to be eradicated by either expelling the colonialist Westerners, known as *kuffar* (apostates), or reforming the regimes that were puppets of the West. However, unlike what Qutb would eventually believe, Mawdudi encouraged a revolution that was relatively peaceful and respected the standing political system, because he advocated that people change the system from the inside out, instead of completely overthrowing it and starting from scratch. This was Mawdudi’s idea of *jihad* (the struggle in Arabic), which in the Quran is described as “the act of striving to serve the purpose of God on this earth” (Abou El Fadl 221). Through his initial introduction to Islamist beliefs, Qutb would initially agree with Mawdudi’s views on *jihad*, but overtime would develop the fervent belief that the only way to incite tangible change was through militant jihad. One such reasoning for this transformation of beliefs was because he lost faith that the political system could be used to overthrow the regimes, which was primarily because of how much influence the British had on King Farouk in Egypt. Later on, Qutb’s conclusive, bellicose thought process, compared to the countless other, more moderate interpretations of jihad, would be exactly what Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assiduously search for and use to justify their tactics.
Throughout the development of the Islamist ideologies and viewpoints, there were countless scholars who each contributed their own, unique take on past scholars’ beliefs and what they believe should be done in their present day to revitalize Islamic supremacy and purity. Sayyid Qutb was the last of these notable, Islamist scholars and as stated previously, was heavily influenced by the ideologies of the scholars before him, particularly Mawdudi. At the outset of his Islamist beliefs, Qutb had many similarities to Mawdudi, like a cynical view of the West, but as Qutb began to develop his own ideologies, he became more radical and militant. However, unlike Mawdudi, Qutb actually lived in the West, specifically the United States, where he claimed to have experienced “the devastating erosion by capitalist individualism of that society’s [America’s] moral character” (Mandaville 98). To him, this solidified his prior notions, which were influenced by Mawdudi’s beliefs, that the West was a source of corruption that would completely derail Islamic society and its beliefs, if its imperialist influences were allowed to take over. Upon his return to Egypt in 1950, he called out to his Egyptian and Arab brethren, claiming: “The white man in Europe or America is our [Islam’s] number-one enemy” (Wright 27). He would act upon this call against the white man and join the Muslim Brotherhood in its revolt against the British troops that were stationed around Cairo to help prop up King Farouk’s regime. Additionally, he reasoned that “if America were Egypt’s future, then the crisis at hand was perhaps more severe than he had originally imagined, and required urgent redress” (Mandaville 98). This redress (i.e. call for a revolt) was by no means peaceful nor confined to just overthrowing the regime, but instead creating an entirely pure Islamic society governed by Sharia Law, top to bottom. This included his advocating of re-teaching children to not honor ‘the white man’, as he readily exemplified in this statement:

“Let us instead plant the seeds of hatred, disgust, and revenge in the souls of these children. Let us teach these children from the time their nails are soft that the white man is the enemy of humanity, and that they should destroy him at the first opportunity” (Wright 28).

Later on, the likes of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State would follow a similar path in essentially brainwashing youth, in the populations they controlled, to believe in their ideologies. This is mostly
evident with the Islamic State, who has actually been able to obtain control over areas of land and began to establish schools as part of its governing system. Within these schools, it actively enacts Qutb’s call to ‘plant the seeds of hatred, disgust, and revenge in the souls of’ children. This can be seen in the photos from a classroom (Figures 2.3 and 2.4) taken by Washington Post reporter, Liz Sly, when she was able to walk through the town of Tal Abyad, soon after it was liberated from the Islamic State’s rule by a U.S. led coalition partnered with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG). As can be seen, instead of teaching math, history, or language skills, this school teaches children how to shoot down a helicopter and construct a bomb. This is just a small piece of the Islamic State’s distorted version of a state and while it may not be the kind that Qutb specifically advocated for, it is one that his writings influenced. Sadly, this is only one of many schools that the Islamic State has established in cities that it gained control of. The Islamic State claims that its main training facility, for what it calls the “Cubs of the Caliphate”, is the Al Farouq Institute in Raqqa, Syria (Elbagir 2016). Here, the Islamic State reportedly trains children as young as 5 years old to be child soldiers and they are turning to these child soldiers more and more as their actual fighters’ numbers rapidly decrease (Elbagir 2016). It is yet another sad effect of the Islamic State’s ability to have control over swaths of land that include large populations of innocent civilians.

Despite Qutb’s calls for political and social programs that would follow and teach what he believed to be true Islamic law, he would never get to see these plans come to fruition. Largely, because of a former ally, the nationalist and militaristic Gamal Abdel Nasser, who would eventually win out in the bid for power in Egypt. Despite initially being allies at the outset of the revolution, Nasser and the Muslim Brotherhood would come to blows out of differing beliefs over who controlled the revolution and what style of government should be implemented, when it succeeded. Nasser eventually won out and began championing his secular, pan-Arab socialist movement, which went against what the Brotherhood and especially Qutb advocated. Eventually, Qutb and the Brotherhood’s animosity
Figure 2.3 shows a whiteboard inside of a school in the town of Tal Abyad, which near the Syrian, Turkish border. As can be seen, Qutb’s call for teaching hatred is actively being carried out as the whiteboard depicts a diagram and instructions for how to shoot down a helicopter.

Source: (Engel 2015)
Figure 2.4 shows a whiteboard inside of a school in the town of Tal Abyad, which is near the Syrian, Turkish border. As can be seen, Qutb’s call for teaching hatred is actively being carried out as the whiteboard depicts a diagram and instructions for how to build a bomb, which looks eerily similar to a grenade.

Source: (Engel 2015)
towards Nasser’s system landed him, along with many Brothers, in jail. While incarcerated, Qutb’s radicalization would only increase; an outcome that would be played out countless times in following terrorism radicalization stories, all the way from 1950’s Egypt to the relatively recent Camp Bucca in Iraq. Additionally, the jailing of Qutb and his continued defiance against the regime only helped increase his aura in the public eye to a martyr like level, which helped engender a greater following.

Just as with his journey to America, Qutb’s time in prison had the complete opposite effect on him than its intended outcome. While the jail cell was supposed to silence his anti-Nasser outcries and break him down into thinking twice about rebelling against the regime, it instead made him a more hardened, radicalized Islamist. The brutal treatment he received hardened him emotionally and scarred him physically, while also causing him to alter his views about what it meant to be truly Muslim. One particularly traumatizing incident was a prison massacre that left twenty three Muslim Brotherhood members dead. After this incident, he began to view those who did not adhere to his own interpretation of Islam as being below him and thus not Muslim. This radical change in thought led him to justify the act of killing those who only claimed, but did not actively practice being Muslim; all in the name of ‘true Islam’. Qutb was labeled these individuals as takfir, which means to pronounce someone as an unbeliever and no longer Muslim (Stern et al 269). By labeling someone as no longer being a true Muslim, it makes it easier to justify killing them and today it is a tactic heavily used by the Islamic State to kill any ‘apostate Muslim’ who defies their interpretation and implementation of Shari’ah Law. For Qutb, this change in thought helped him develop a very black and white mindset and divide the world into two camps: true Islamists and jahiliyya, which is the period of ignorance and barbarity that existed before the divine message of the Prophet Muhammad (Byman 74). Those who he condemned to be jahiliyya were those who were Western influenced and thus did not practice Islam in the way that Qutb believed it should be truly practiced. To expand on his jahiliyya definition and just like Mawdudi, he considered any regime that did not believe God was the only sovereign, ruling being was jahiliyya and
deserved to be overthrown. Therefore, he also believed that any nationalist movements were in a way worshipping these jahiliyya regimes, because the ideologies of nationalism put the importance of the state and its independent success before God and the idea that He is the ultimate ruler. Jahiliyya was a term that Qutb frequently used long ago, but is still a term being used today by the Islamic State, further showing his lasting influence. For the Islamic State, the term is used as a justification for destroying pre-Islamic ruins. This has most notably occurred in its destruction of Roman ruins in Palmyra, but has also happened in other areas controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, like in Khorsabad, formally called Dur Sharrukin, which was a former capital of the Assyrian empire in Nineveh (Shaheen 2015).

Qutb would never live to see the day that many of his writings were put into action, because he was hanged on August 29, 1966 on the charges of plotting to overthrow Nasser and assassinate other public figures. However, Qutb did know the power of his words and the extent of his influence, quite possibly better than the Egyptian government did. He was quoted telling his also jailed sister, Hamida, that “my words will be stronger if they kill me” (Wright 36). Stronger and enduring they have been because, currently fifty years after his death, his original writings have been used and continue to be used time and again by Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and many other groups, to help justify their ideology and means.

While Qutb prophesized to say that his words would be stronger if he were a martyr, there is no telling if he could have ever foreseen the magnitude of the continuously rising totals of death and destruction that Radicalized Islamists are carrying out with the ‘blessing’ of his ideologies. It is also hard to know if he ever dreamt that his words would influence individuals like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the fathers of Al Qaeda. Both men radicalized and were introduced to Qutb’s writings at an early age. Bin Laden is said to have experienced a spiritual awakening at the young age of fourteen, most likely from the influence of a gym teacher he had who was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. From there on out it was said that bin Laden was strictly religious,
“fasting twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, in emulation of the Prophet. [Going] to bed right after isha, the evening prayer. In addition to the five prayers a day [typical for all practicing Muslims], he set his alarm for one in the morning and prayed alone every night” (Wright 87).

This was all done in addition to many other ancillary practices that are not required of a typical Muslim, as well as strongly encouraging others to follow his path. In high school, bin Laden would join the Muslim Brothers’ organization in Saudi Arabia, which was frowned upon by the Saudi regime and thus illegal. Through this underground organization, bin Laden connected with many other zealously Islamic teenagers and further expanded his radicalized beliefs. After graduating high school, bin Laden decided to pursue a degree in economics at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It was at the university when bin Laden was introduced to Qutb’s works, through the help of his professors, many of which were Brothers who had fled from Egypt or Syria (Wright 91). Coincidentally, the younger brother of Sayyid, Mohammad Qutb, was a professor at the university and bin Laden religiously attended his lectures (Wright 91). Through his lectures, Mohammad defended his brother’s name against critics blaming his writing for empowering violent radicals. While initially siding with the tolerant and accepting views of Islam, he would eventually flip the script and begin down the path that would eventually open up his mind to accept terror as a rational outlet for change. Bin Laden’s right hand man in Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri was also introduced to Qutb at a relatively young age. Zawahiri though was introduced to Qutb by his uncle, Mahfouz Azzam (Wright 43). While also an avid reader of Qutb’s writings, Zawahiri heard personal stories about Qutb from his uncle, who had, had Qutb as an Arabic teacher and also was a writer for the Muslim Brotherhood magazine that Qutb edited. Mahfouz also had been Qutb’s personal lawyer and had become exceptionally close to the scholar, allowing him to be one of the last people Qutb saw on death row. This close relationship netted Mahfouz many unique, personal stories about Qutb and his life, most notably his hardships in prison. Overall, these stories had a resounding effect on Zawahiri, who was still in his early teens. As a fifteen year old, Zawahiri would form an Islamist organization bent on overthrowing the Egyptian government, in the name of
establishing an Islamic state (Wright 44). Later on, Osama bin Laden and Zawahiri would meet in the mountains of Afghanistan and following the Soviet invasion, they would combine their talents, funds, and insignificant organizations to create Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda was thus created out of a similarity in goals to “create a jihadist vanguard movement – a concept championed by jihadist thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb- that would support the struggles of Muslims across the globe, including uprisings against so-called apostate regimes in the Muslim world” (Byman 09).

Bin Laden and Zawahiri would always carry Qutb’s influence with them and would eventually act on his calls to fight back against the West by carrying out terrorist attacks in America, Great Britain, Spain, and others. These attacks would change the world forever and destroy the lives of thousands of innocent civilians, but they would not end up bringing the West to its knees, while boosting the ‘true Islam’ into prominence. Additionally, these attacks would not help lead to the formation of an Islamic state, but instead would cause Al Qaeda to retreat underground and lose the territory it had held in Afghanistan. Currently, the Islamic State is trying to pick up where Al Qaeda failed to succeed, particularly in the formation of an Islamic caliphate, but there’s is ruled by an interpretation of Sharia Law that even Al Qaeda has condemned. While this successive group has carved out a significantly sized portion of land within the boundaries of both Iraq and Syria, they are still immensely far away from completing any of Qutb’s radicalized goals and they do not appear to be close to doing so anytime soon, if ever. However, before the Islamic State, there was Al Qaeda, and before Al Qaeda there was an angry, disillusioned, rich, and lost Osama bin Laden who had only recently radicalized and was looking to make his mark on the world. The focus of the next chapter is how Osama bin Laden became radicalized, eventually founded Al Qaeda, and then turned it into the world’s most infamous terrorist organization.
III: Al Qaeda Central

Osama bin Laden, nicknamed The Sheikh, founded Al Qaeda in Peshawar, Pakistan in August, 1988 after helping finance the fight of the Afghani Mujahideen against the Soviet Union (Byman 9). Ten years later, Al Qaeda would expand by merging with the group al-Jihad, which was founded by the current leader of Al Qaeda, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, otherwise known as The Teacher. The two had become close friends in Afghanistan, during the Soviet invasion, but before meeting and eventually amalgamating their skills and resources, both men had been influenced by Sayyid Qutb’s writings at a young age. Similar to Qutb’s quest to implement his beliefs, Al Qaeda’s roots were humble and mired in many failures and obstacles. Unlike Qutb, Al Qaeda had a larger base of resources, thanks to the bin Laden family’s construction empire, and a more expansive and outlaw friendly environment in Afghanistan, which allowed it to learn and grow from its mistakes. From this incubation, Al Qaeda was able to complete at least a paltry example of Qutb’s vision of taking the fight to the home front of who they believed were the kuffar (apostates/un-believers). Following its direct attacks on America on September 11th, 2001, Al Qaeda had developed the maneuverability to take its operations underground, in order to survive the onslaught that came in retaliation. However, once Al Qaeda went underground, Bin Laden would never be able to complete both his and Qutb’s dream of establishing a true, Islamic nation. This dream would have to wait until the Iraqi branch of Al Qaeda eventually became what is today known as the Islamic State, an organization that has taken control of large swaths of land in Iraq and Syria and claims to have established a new Islamic state governed by what they believe is the true interpretation of Sharia Law. This case study will address the events surrounding Al Qaeda Central, the core of the Al Qaeda organization, up to their chartering of the previously mentioned branch in Iraq. Overall, the case study will specifically focus on the goals of which Al Qaeda was founded on, the events and environment that that allowed its formation, and the overall structure of the organization, which gave it the ability to orchestrate the deadliest, foreign attack on United States soil since Pearl Harbor.
“Al Qaeda [was founded to] fulfill three related, but distinct, goals: first, it would serve as a terrorist group in its own right; second, it would continue the Services Office’s (a logistical center bin Laden financed to help bring foreign fighters in to fight the Soviets) role of helping organize, train, and otherwise provide logistics for Muslim jihadists—but this time to assist in the struggles around the world, not just in Afghanistan; and third, it would try to unify, lead, and reorient the broader jihadist movement, giving it greater purpose and direction” (Byman 9).

From the get go, bin Laden had lofty dreams by wanting to focus on what he called the ‘far enemy’, which went along with the goal of expanding the role of the Services Office to assisting threatened Muslims all around the world. Loosely defined, the ‘far enemy’ was essentially the United States and its allies who supported the *kuffar* regimes in the Middle East. On the flip side, the oppressive regimes with U.S. backing were considered the ‘near enemy’ and while bin Laden held a rigid animosity towards them, the United States was the primary source of antipathy. Bin Laden believed he had created something unique and wanted to separate Al Qaeda from past Islamist organizations and wanted to make his organization as legitimate and attractive to recruits as possible. One way he did this was by advertising Al Qaeda as an attractive employment opportunity, offering single members a monthly salary of around $1,000, married members around $1,500 per month and everyone had a month long paid vacation along with a health-care plan (Wright 162). To many Afghani’s living in poverty, as well as even some distraught men abroad looking for a direction in life, this was an opportunity to develop a suitable lifestyle for themselves. This attractiveness from abroad is exactly what bin Laden wanted, because to him, Al Qaeda was to be the base of global jihad and by no means a humanitarian organization. To make this clear, bin Laden “pledged to be the constant enemy of the world’s tyrants” and would “promote jihad awareness” and “prepare and equip jihadist cadres, coordinating them to create a unified international Jihad movement” (“Al Qa’ida’s Structure and Bylaws [English Translation]” 2002). Al Qaeda’s first bid at coordinating this international jihadist movement “was an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Afghanistan’s former king, Zahir Shah, in Rome in 1991”
(Byman 13). This botched attempt was just one of many failures that the fledging organization would experience as growing pains.

Osama bin Laden claimed that his hatred for the United States dated back to the year 1982, “when America permitted the Israelis to invade Lebanon and the American Sixth Fleet helped them”. Furthermore, he claimed to recall the carnage of “blood and severed limbs, women and children sprawled everywhere. Houses destroyed along with their occupants and high rises demolished over their residents… The situation was like a crocodile meeting a helpless child, powerless except for his screams…” (Wright 172).

Despite the aid provided by the American CIA to help the Afghani Mujahideen in their fight against the Soviets, bin Laden carried these grotesque images and animadversions with him throughout the Soviet invasion and up to the founding of Al Qaeda. This animosity would only grow larger in the years following 1988 and would expand exponentially in the year 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait and came knocking on the door Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province. Initially, bin Laden offered the services of his Mujahideen forces that he lauded had just ran the communist, secularist Soviets out of Afghanistan. He thus, adamantly believed that they could do the same to Saddam Hussain’s Iraqi forces and pledged to “prepare one hundred thousand fights with good combat capability within three months” (Wright 179). However, the Saudi’s had a better offer from the bin Laden’s bête noire, the United States. To help protect Saudi Arabia’s sovereignty, but most importantly their vast oil reserves, the U.S. pledged nearly seven hundred thousand troops who were better trained and equipped than bin Laden’s Mujahideen. Despite the fears of a prolonged occupation and the idea of having non-Islamic soldiers within the same boundaries as Islam’s two holiest sites, the Saud family granted permission to the U.S. to set up bases in the Kingdom. As expected, bin Laden’s response to the allowance of the U.S. forces on Saudi soil was that of abhorrence and outrage and he went on to call the Saudi clergy’s fatwa (ruling issued by an Islamic scholar (ulama) inadmissible. Following the cessation of the Gulf War, bin Laden issued a fatwa of his own in 1992, in regards to the American bases on Islamic soil. In this fatwa, bin Laden called for
jihad against the Western ‘occupation’, which to him meant any form of a military base, of Islamic lands and specifically called out U.S. forces for attack (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 59). One of the global destinations for the deployment of troops in 1992 was Somalia, in order to respond to the humanitarian crisis started by its civil war. Nearby, in Sudan, bin Laden and Al Qaeda were just beginning to set up shop in their new, temporary base. It did not take long for bin Laden to act on his words and “on December 29, 1992, a bomb exploded in the Mövenpick Hotel in Aden, Yemen, and another blew up prematurely in the parking lot of a nearby luxury hotel, the Goldmohur” (Wright 198). The targets were American troops transferring through Yemen on their way to Somalia and while no American deaths occurred, the attacks killed an Australian tourist and Yemeni hotel worker. While ultimately another example of a botched attack by Al Qaeda in its quest to bring down the world’s now, sole superpower, it would not be too much longer before Al Qaeda gained enough stability and support to devise attacks with disastrous consequences.

Al Qaeda’s stay in Sudan was short and economically fruitless for bin Laden, thanks to his many failed business ventures and charitable loans to the Sudanese government, both monetarily and in the form of building infrastructure, in order to stay in good standing. Additionally, during his stay in Sudan, Saudi Arabia felt that it was time for the remainder of the bin Laden family, still residing and thriving in Saudi Arabia, to cut ties with the growing antagonist that Osama was becoming in their eyes. This was solidified when “the Interior Ministry ordered bin Laden’s family to cut him off (monetarily), and it seized his share of the [bin Laden construction] company –about $7 million” (Wright 223). This sundering left bin Laden without any real form of income, because his businesses had all folded, and Sudan was slowly becoming alienated in the international community for harboring bin Laden. While, up to his stay in Sudan, bin Laden had not yet caused the death of any American citizens, he had still been tagged as a key financer of international attacks that had, most notably the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. This, along with his previous fatwa calling for an attack on U.S. soldiers, as well as his
actual attempts to kill U.S. soldiers, had caused for him to become unfavorable in the eyes of the American government. As the author Lawrence Wright put it, at this point in time “bin Laden was not yet a wanted man, but he certainly was an unwanted one” (Wright 251). This alone would be enough for the Americans to be able to pressure the Sudanese government to push him out of their country. Bin Laden would eventually leave Sudan on May 18, 1996 a broken family man and a broke businessman, to the tune of what he estimated was a more than $160 million net loss in assets (Wright 253). Now, for the second time in a little over five years, the United States had yet again crushed bin Laden’s dreams and as he chartered his path back to Afghanistan, revenge was at the forefront of his mind.

Osama bin Laden left Sudan an undesired man and he arrived in Afghanistan with the same lack of allure. Bin Laden had left Afghanistan following the retreat of the Soviet forces and during the beginning of the fratricidal war between the Mujahideen forces for their bids for power. Seven years later and the latter war was still waging and Afghanistan was still in ruin, if not more severely than before. The most powerful power out of the warring factions was the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group that had gained the trust and backing of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, who both provided the Taliban with the training and weapons it needed to gain the upper hand in the Afghan Civil War.

Because of their alliance with Saudi Arabia, the Taliban were initially weary of bin Laden’s arrival, but were told to keep him quiet and contained. Both groups were weary of the other, bin Laden of the Taliban because of his lack of knowledge about them and the Taliban of bin Laden because of his international reputation as a sponsor and leader of terrorist activities. Eventually, the two groups did grow closer together. While initially low on funding, following his losses in Sudan, once bin Laden was able to rebound and build up his assets he began to support his hosts in Afghanistan, like he had in Sudan and it was estimated that as much as $20 million of Al Qaeda’s pre-9/11 budget went to the Taliban (Byman 22). This close relationship led to the Taliban allowing Al Qaeda to set up training bases that began to attract fighters from across the globe. All of the while, bin Laden never drifted from his
hatred of America and he made it known on August 23, 1996 when he issued his most infamous fatwa against America, befittingly labeled as his “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places” (Wright 280). By this he was referencing the American troops that were still in Saudi Arabia, but he also questioned the legitimacy, in Islamic terms, of the Saudi monarchy. At the time, bin Laden was still a negligible force in the eyes of America, largely because he was relatively weak at the issuance of the fatwa and up to that time had still not killed any Americans. So again in 1997, during an interview with CNN, bin Laden let the world know of his call for war against America. Through the interview he also expressed his frustrations that:

“the U.S. today has set a double standard, calling whoever goes against its injustice a terrorist. It wants to occupy our (Muslims) countries, steal our resources, impose on us agents to rule... and wants us to agree to all these. If we refuse to do so, it will say, ‘You are terrorists” (Wright 280).

Once again the threats, while serious in nature, were not given much thought due to the current abilities or lack thereof, of Al Qaeda jihadists. Regardless, bin Laden stayed true to his path and continued building up his finances, largely through donors, and his organization’s power by expanding and improving his training camps and recruiting efforts. Then, once he was reunited again with his former colleague and personal doctor, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, he would begin acting on his previous threats.

Ayman Al-Zawahiri was a medical surgeon by trade, but a Salafist Islamist by heart and following bin Laden’s return to Saudi Arabia in 1989, he too left Afghanistan to pursue his own radical dreams of fighting against the kuffar. Like bin Laden, Zawahiri had founded his own jihadist group, al-Jihad, also known as Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), with the goal of overthrowing the Egyptian government and establishing an Islamic one in its place. Like bin Laden, Zawahiri found the execution of jihad to be a very difficult and costly endeavor and when bin Laden moved his operations to Sudan 1991, Zawahiri soon followed. While in Sudan, both of the jihadists’ groups worked together on occasion, but never formally combined. The two were split up again after the Sudanese government kicked both bin Laden
and Zawahiri out of Sudan on separate occasions. While bin Laden went straight to Afghanistan and began rebuilding the Al Qaeda brand, Zawahiri went elsewhere in failed attempts to reestablish al Jihad. It is believed that he traveled extensively following his expulsion, until he eventually settled down in Chechnya, believing that it would be a prime location to reestablish al Jihad. Zawahiri had these sanguine notions because he believed that the region’s somewhat, close proximity to Afghanistan would be the perfect area to help “form a mujahid Islamic belt to the South of Russia that will be connected in the east to Pakistan, which is brimming with Mujahideen movements in Kashmir” (Wright 283). This plan would never get off the ground because on his arrival in Russia, he was immediately arrested for traveling without a visa. He was later jailed and later released, at which time he decided that his future prospects would be brightest with the help of bin Laden. Upon his reunion with bin Laden, the two would align their groups under one banner and overarching set of goals in 1998 and then officially merge in 2001 (Byman 94). Soon after this 1998 alignment, Al Qaeda would put into motion the first of a string of large and successful terrorist attacks that had been in the works since its first couple of botched attempts.

On February 23, 1998, a little over six months before Al Qaeda’s first, major successful attack, they issued another *fatwa*, this time announcing that Zawahiri’s group, as well as a few other Mujahideen groups, would be combining with Al Qaeda and its grievances with America (Wright 294-295). The *fatwa* was drafted by Zawahiri, which is important because it showed that he was willing to deviate from his original goals of focusing on the Egyptian regime and would instead put his focus on the far enemy, America. This alignment would help finalize a plan that had been put in motion years before by the Al Qaeda higher ups; bombing an American embassy in Africa. When conducted, the attack was a coordinated bombing of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania on August 7, 1998, killing 224 people -12 Americans and 212 Africans- and wounding thousands more (Byman 25). Now, unlike before, Osama bin Laden had successfully taken American lives and had thus changed
Figure 3.1 shows the aftermath destruction of both the bombings in Nairobi, Kenya (left side) and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (right side).
Source: (Gettleman 2011)

America’s outlook completely. America had been taken completely by surprise and so was the rest of the world and Muslim community who unabashedly condemned this kind of mass violence against innocent civilians, the majority of who were Muslims themselves. In response, America launched multiple missile attacks on Al Qaeda’s training camps in Afghanistan, but they had a minimal effect on the overall operation. To them, the single barrage of missiles was not much different than what they had endured from the Soviets years before and were thus dug in for the long hall. Zawahiri was later quoted as saying after the attacks that “the war has only just begun; the Americans should now await the answer” (Wright 324). The answer came two years later on the morning of October 12, 2000 when a small fishing boat, turned suicide bomb blew a forty foot by forty foot hole, pictured in Figure 3.2, in the side of the destroyer, USS Cole. Based on the total sum of casualties, 17 U.S. sailors killed, the effect of the attack was rather miniscule, but the components of the attack and what they represented overall were enormously important. In essence, this was a David vs Goliath esque attack because a small dingy almost single handedly sunk a billion dollar warship that at the time was equipped with some of the
world’s most advanced defensive technology. Yet these innovations, *bida* to bin Laden, proved ineffective in stopping the attack and ultimately the crippling of the ship. To bin Laden, “the destroyer represented the capital of the West and the small boat represented Mohammad” (Wright 361). By striking the very war machine that bin Laden chided was occupying and destroying the Islamic Holy Lands, he hoped to draw the United States into a war that would have similar outcomes to the previous war with the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. When the U.S. response was nil, bin Laden was extremely riled and disappointed for the lack of his intended outcome. Just as before, bin Laden was not easily deterred, meaning he would continue to poke the bear until he received a suitable response, which to him was a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and a direct fight against his Mujahideen forces. It would turn out that this response was just around the corner, but it would take bin Laden’s most ambitious, sinister, and senselessly deadly strike ever, to achieve it.

By the time the dust had settled and the conclusive body count had made September 11, 2001 the largest magnitude terrorist attack in the history of the world, the detestable plan orchestrated on that day was already five years old. The sowing of the seed that would later produce the 9/11 attack occurred in 1996, not too long after bin Laden, his family, and closest followers had been banished from Sudan and relocated to Afghanistan. Khaled Sheikh Mohammed was the man that sowed the seed in bin Laden’s mind during a visit he had with bin Laden discussing future attack schematics that Mohammed had envisioned. Many of Mohammed’s schemes included airplanes. Up to that point, terrorist attacks involving airplanes had strictly been hijackings to hold hostages for ransom, but Mohammed’s ideas called for a new, more deadly use. He wanted to turn these mundane transportation devices into deadly missiles and one of the ideas he approached bin Laden with involved training Jihadists to fly and crash airplanes into American buildings. At the time, bin Laden felt that Al Qaeda did not have the funds or the man power to achieve a successful execution of the plan, so he tabled it until 1999 when he and Zawahiri were looking to answer the Clinton administration’s missile
barrage. Even before the American retaliation for the 1998 embassy bombings, bin Laden had been searching for an avenue of attacking the American homeland and had stayed in contact with Mohammed, who had spurned bin Laden’s attempt to recruit him to join Al Qaeda in 1996. However, in 1998, Mohammed began to reconsider the offer and eventually joined the organization either at the end of 1998 or beginning of 1999 and soon after received funding from bin Laden to put his hijacking plan into motion. Throughout the following two years a select group of Al Qaeda operatives would train in secrecy, for the most part at flight schools on U.S. soil, in preparation to September 11th. When discussing the attack’s ramifications, bin Laden believed that:

“America is a great power possessed of tremendous military might and a wide ranging economy, but all of this is built upon an unstable
foundation which can be targeted, with special attention to its obvious weak spots” (Wright 348).

Therefore, the selected targets had to encompass both economics and politics, which is why the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington DC and either the Capital or White House in DC were all selected. The last target is shrouded in uncertainty due to the bravery and sacrifice of the passengers who overcame the hijackers on the fourth plane and caused it to crash prematurely in a field in Pennsylvania. Through the targeting of these key sites, bin Laden hoped to cause both political and economic turmoil in the U.S., which would hopefully bring the country to its knees, allowing his Islamic utopia a clear path to unite the ummah. Following the attacks, which netted a total death toll of nearly three thousand innocent lives, bin Laden issued a pre-recorded victory speech boasting of his organizations successful attacks and claiming that “these events have divided the whole world into two sides—the side of the believers and the side of the infidels. Every Muslim has to rush to make his religion victorious. The winds of faith have come” (Wright 417). Through the middle statement, bin Laden hoped to incite an uprising of Mujahideen forces that would fight for his interpretation of Islam, but to his dismay they never arrived in Afghanistan. Instead, the winds brought forth the strength of the U.S. military dropping precision bombs on the vast cave network that Al Qaeda was hiding in. Despite this onslaught, bin Laden, Zawahiri, and many other high profile operatives were able to escape into Pakistan and fight another day. In total, it was estimated by the 9/11 Commission that Al Qaeda spent between $400,000 and $500,000 to plan and conduct the attack, which caused an estimated $10 billion in damages and changed the world forever. (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 169) The aftermath of the attacks also changed Al Qaeda forever. By successfully orchestrating an attack on the American homeland, bin Laden completed his goal of separating Al Qaeda from past Islamic organizations. However, as a side effect to that success, Al Qaeda ended up losing their homeland entirely after the American coalition all but obliterated Al Qaeda’s hold on Afghanistan. This loss of a safe haven, where they could openly operate a tactile base for new recruits to come to, would hinder Al
Figure 3.3 is a bird's eye view of the total damage done at the World Trade Center site in New York City, six days after the attack. At the World Trade Center site, 2,830 people lost their lives (out of the total 2,996 who lost their lives in the four attacks combined), including 403 emergency responders.

Source: (Barnett et al 2002)
Al Qaeda’s attacks on September 11th, 2001 were intended to net troves of new recruits willing to fight for the winning team in taking down the infidels and while it did gain many new recruits and supporters, like was addressed earlier, the numbers were not on par with what bin Laden expected. What they did receive in troves was criticism and from all sides of the world and from all cultures and religions, even from some fundamentalist Islamists who felt that the mass killing of innocents, that included other Muslims, was sacrilegious. Additionally, they received criticisms from former allies, particularly from Sayyid Imam al Sharif, who was the former leader of al Jihad, which was the group Zawahiri had founded after leaving Afghanistan in 1989. Sharif’s take on the attacks was:

“Ramming America has become the shortest road to fame and leadership among Arabs and Muslims. But what good is it if you destroy one your enemy’s buildings, and he destroys one of your countries? What good is it if you kill one of his people, and he kills a thousand of yours?... That, in short, is my evaluation of 9/11” (Wright 2008).

Overall, this is a valid criticism of the situation because this one day of attacks, which did lead to some setbacks in America, ultimately led to the complete destruction of the freedom and the organizational structure that Al Qaeda had in Afghanistan. Initially, Al Qaeda had a strict, hierarchical structure with Osama bin Laden at the helm in the self-appointed position of emir, which can be seen in Figure 3.4. Directly below bin Laden was Ayman Al-Zawahiri, in the position of chief deputy to bin Laden, along with the advisory committee, which was made up of the most trusted members of Al Qaeda. Below these two groupings was the fragmented grouping of individual committees who each had specifically assigned tasks, like military, intelligence, religious, or internal security matters. Each of these groups then had an appointed head who would report to either bin Laden or the advisory committee. One of the glaring differences between this structure and the more de-centralized, organic structure that Al Qaeda would take on after 9/11 was that the many lower, fragmented segments rarely
Figure 3.4 exhibits the hierarchical organizational structure that Al Qaeda used in its early days. Each group only reported to the group directly above it and there was limited, horizontal communication between groups on the same level. This can be seen by the lack of connection between the various committees and subcommittees that are not under the same committee. The biggest downfall of this structure is that if one of the higher ups were to be killed, it could easily sever the communications within the organization. This is because each of the lower groups only reported to one specific person in the grouping above it and there was the same reverse structure when giving orders. A lack of connection throughout the organization also makes it harder to replace a deceased leader because only a select few individuals knew what that person’s specific tasks were and how to do them.

Source: (Zimmerman 08)
because only a select number of people would aware of or even qualified for the work that, that higher up had done. Al Qaeda recognized these issues too and according to the former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, Michael Scheuer: “They [Al Qaeda] pay a lot of attention to leadership succession, so one of the main tenets of Al Qaeda is to train people to succeed leaders who are captured or killed” (George W. Bush White House Archives 2001-08). However, after they became the primary target of the U.S. (one of their original goals) and their operatives began to be killed or captured on a semi-regular basis, they began to slowly de-centralize their organizational structure. Despite these critical losses, Al Qaeda continued to relatively thrive, as reported by Katherine Zimmerman of the American Enterprise Institute’s Critical Threats Project, who stated that:

“Even severely weakening the core group has not rendered the al Qaeda network impotent. The regional groups continue to thrive, and the threat to the United States from some, such as AQAP (Al Qaeda’s Arabian Peninsula Branch), has increased despite damage done to al Qaeda’s core” (Zimmerman 08).

Being forced underground, because of the constant bombardment by the American military, only accelerated this process because they were no longer able to consolidate the leadership in one place. By de-centralizing and becoming more organic, this meant that each member was better connected to other members of the group and that instead of only having a vertical top-down structure, there now was a horizontal structure too. This can be seen in Figure 3.5. The horizontal structure allowed for a better understanding of the inner-workings of the whole organization to develop for each member, which made it easier to replace individuals and allowed members to advise other committees on something that they thought could be done better. The biggest difference though was that now the fragmented groups at the bottom of the hierarchical structure had more freedom than before. Now, instead of issuing direct orders, the core mainly provided general guidance to the fragmented groups and, for the most part, left it to the groups to make their own decisions of how to complete their missions. The AEI Critical Threats Project tags this strategy as the one used in some of Al Qaeda’s larger
Figure 3.5 exhibits the de-centralized, organic organizational structure that Al Qaeda adopted once the U.S. began to relentlessly target its leadership structure, following the 9/11 attacks. One of the biggest differences in between Figure 3.4 and Figure 3.5 is the horizontal connections exhibited in Figure 3.5. The horizontal structure allowed committees and the newly founded branches to communicate more freely with one another, giving the organizational structure a more organic, instead of top-down, hierarchical feel. The addition of the branches was a noteworthy addition too, because as Al Qaeda was decimated in Afghanistan it expanded outward by establishing other branches throughout the Middle East. 
Source: (Zimmerman 09)

attacks following 9/11, as exemplified by

“the 2004 Madrid bombings and 2005 London bombing [which] were conducted by groups pursuing an operation, likely with support from the network, but not necessarily as the result of a direct order” (Zimmerman 10).

This strategy was intended to make the overall organization more resilient and dampen the importance of individual members, which would make the strategy of cutting the head off of the snake, harder to execute. While de-centralizing does hinder this strategy a bit, it only does so to an extent because the higher ranking members are still the ones driving the core ideologies of the organization and are the charismatic leaders that attract more recruits. Once too many of those leaders are taken out, the group begins to fall apart or stray from its core goals and ideologies. Another deficiency of the de-centralization method is the fact that by being forced underground, Al Qaeda branched out to more
places while simultaneously not having a tangible, core representative to look back to for guidance. Lacking this tangible core made the leadership look less powerful and gave the branches the idea that they could do more of what they wanted and not what the Al Qaeda core wanted, because the consequences would be minimal. This tiny fragmentation came to the forefront of Al Qaeda’s problems when its Iraqi branch, Al Qaeda in Iraq, constantly butted heads with the Al Qaeda core over tactics and targets and it constantly deviated from the Al Qaeda core’s guidance and wishes. Eventually, AQI’s successor strayed so much that Al Qaeda will formally sever its ties to the group, allowing the group become its own entity, known today as the Islamic State.

Al Qaeda grew substantially from its beginnings in a room in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1988 to one of the deadliest terrorist organizations today and without Osama bin Laden this rise likely would not have occurred. While bin Laden did adopt many of Al Qaeda’s ideologies from prior Salafist and Islamist scholars, it was bin Laden’s own charisma that allowed Al Qaeda to get as big as it did. At the start, Al Qaeda would have had a significantly more difficult time getting off the ground without bin Laden’s deep pockets and then later on it likely would have folded after being exiled and bankrupted, if it did not have bin Laden’s ardent drive and open wallet to keep its goals alive. Additionally, it took a man like bin Laden, who was so dedicated to his beliefs and so morally deficient, that he would do anything to accomplish his goals. In all, as Lawrence Wright stated in his book about Al Qaeda and 9/11, “all of these were qualities that one can ascribe to a cult leader or a madman. But there was also artistry involved, not only to achieve the spectacular effect but also to enlist the imagination of the men whose lives bin Laden required” to do his bidding (Wright 375). However, even a morally black leader such as Osama bin Laden has his boundaries and it would take a man by the name of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of the eventual branch of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), to find those boundaries and pressure them. The next chapter will focus on this man, who will challenge bin Laden’s patience, while also pushing the American forces in Iraq, as well as the Iraqi people, to their limits. All of this will culminate in him
eventually pledging *bayah* (allegiance) to bin Laden and forming an Al Qaeda branch in Iraq, which will become Al Qaeda in Iraq and eventually today’s Islamic State.
IV: Al Qaeda in Iraq

The precursor to Al Qaeda in Iraq, Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-I-Jihad (JTWJ), was founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, otherwise known as Sheikh of the Slaughterers, in Herat, Afghanistan in 1999 (Warrick 67). Zarqawi started this venture with the help of bin Laden, who is estimated to have loaned Zarqawi close to $200,000, but without the requirement of Zarqawi’s bayah (allegiance) to Al Qaeda (Weiss et al 13). This allegiance would not come until 2004 and from the get go the relationship would fluctuate wildly from being hot and cold. In a constructive sense, many journalists and analysts, like the Washington Post’s journalist Craig Whitlock, said that “Zarqawi gave a boost to the al-Qaeda network by giving it a highly visible presence in Iraq at a time when its original leaders went into hiding or were killed after the Sept. 11, 2001” (Whitlock 2006). Negatively, Zarqawi constantly clashed with Al Qaeda’s brass over what/whom he targeted and how he did it. While bin Laden was a fervent believer in the striking of the ‘far enemy’, the West, Zarqawi fell into the ‘near enemy’ camp and thus wanted to focus on the oppressive Middle East regimes and a group bin Laden had not targeted before; Shi’ite Muslims. Additionally, as can be inferred from his nickname as ‘Sheikh of the Slaughterers’, Zarqawi was none for the brutal and broadcasted butchery of any enemy that came in his way, which consisted of nearly everyone that did not agree with him. Bin Laden was more silently opposed to Zarqawi’s brutal antics and for the most part, put his disagreements away. On the contrary, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, bin Laden’s right hand man, did not hold back his disapprovals and called Zarqawi out for bombing and gorily executing Shi’ite Muslims daily, claiming that these tactics alienated more Muslims than drew them in. Despite these resounding criticisms from the most well-known radical jihadists of the day, Zarqawi continued blazing his own path of death and destruction until his own death, at the hands of American soldiers, in the summer of 2006. This case study will cover this time period of the rise of Al Qaeda and Iraq, from its beginnings as a small group funded by Al Qaeda in Afghanistan to the most brutal and
divisive organization that nearly plunged Iraq into an uncontrollable civil war. Specifically, this case study will focus on how Zarqawi got his start and eventually aligned himself with bin Laden and Al Qaeda, how Zarqawi’s endeavors differed from Al Qaeda’s and what that meant for their relationship with one another, and then finally the events that would set up the eventual transition of the group from Al Qaeda in Iraq to the Islamic State of today. Al Qaeda in Iraq would change the way the world looked at terrorism and would also change how Al Qaeda Central conducted its future operations, because, as the Pulitzer prize winning author, Joby Warrick, put it “this was no al-Qaeda offshoot. This was al-Qaeda 2.0” (Warrick 187).

Zarqawi had not always been a strict adherer to Islamist rhetoric, because as a teenager he had dropped out of high school and fell into a life of crime before his mother introduced him to Islamist ideology. Once introduced to the ideology, he delved into the teachings and eventually set off to fight the Soviet’s in Afghanistan, but arrived too late to do so. Instead, he fought the Communist government that was left behind and while abroad he gained formal military training, as well as expanded his Islamist beliefs to a more hardline, Salafist approach. Later on, he tried again to join the prominent jihadi venture of the time when he attempted to travel to the northern Caucasus in 1999, but had visa troubles. Instead, he decided to head to Afghanistan again, where Osama bin Laden had begun to cement Al Qaeda as a prominent, jihadist organization. Throughout his travels and Islamist transformation, Zarqawi made it his ultimate goal to re-establish Islam in society and have the hardline version that he believed was the true, original practice of Islam to be common law. He hoped to accomplish this through the establishment of Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, which he was able to found with the help of a loan from bin Laden. Later on it was reported by one of bin Laden’s senior deputies, Sayf al-Adel, that “they [Zarqawi and his followers] were establishing a mini Islamic society” (Warrick 68). Like bin Laden, Zarqawi wanted to reunite the ummah underneath this re-invigorated Islamic society. However, the two differed in how they believed that this should be executed. As stated before,
bin Laden was a believer in the idea that the ‘far enemy’ was the bigger threat, which was why he obsessed so much over American and Western targets for all of his major attacks. In his eyes, he believed that by taking down the goliath that was the American, hegemonic power, it would then leave an open path for him to reunite the ummah under his interpretation of Islamic law and religious practice. Zarqawi disagreed and felt that the ‘near enemy’, specifically the regime of his home country of Jordan and neighboring Israel should be the main focus of jihad. One of the main reasons for this was because Zarqawi took an extremely hardline approach to defining kuffar, which he agreed with bin Laden on labeling the West as, but also included Shi’ite Muslims and any fellow Sunnis who did not adhere to the strict Salafist beliefs. Bin Laden had never included these groups of people in his ideologies out the fear that attacking them might alienate the more moderate Muslims from joining his cause. Zarqawi also had no limits in his beliefs of how people should be killed. While bin Laden’s plan that murdered nearly three thousand innocent civilians was far from humane, Al Qaeda would never go to the brutal lengths of videotaped beheadings and other execution forms that Zarqawi would later implement in Iraq. Through these differences, Zarqawi would constantly bump heads with bin Laden and many of the Al Qaeda elite, but until Zarqawi’s death in 2004 the partnership would continue to stick.

Despite having founded the group that would become Al Qaeda in Iraq in 1999, the general public would not learn of Abu Musab al Zarqawi until Colin Powell’s speech to the United Nations on February 5, 2003. Through this speech, the former Secretary of State hoped to make a case for a United States invasion of Iraq on the grounds that the Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, allegedly had ties to Al Qaeda through the harboring of Zarqawi. In Powell’s direct words, he claimed that “Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda lieutenants” (Warrick 95). At the time Zarqawi, was in fact living in Iraq, but was holed-up in the northeastern mountains, near the Iranian border in what was considered Kurdish
territory and thus off limits to the Iraqi regime due to the no fly zone implemented following the Gulf War. This meant that Saddam Hussein was in fact not harboring Zarqawi and that Zarqawi was instead taking advantage of the loose tribal structure that controlled this rocky, rather inaccessible terrain of Iraq. Powell would later claim to regret the entirety of the speech given that day, but this regret would not turn back history and stop the gears that were put in motion as a side effect to citing Zarqawi as the Al Qaeda connection to Iraq (Weisman 2005). The most notable side effect was that by including the unknown Zarqawi as the prime suspect, turned him into a celebrity radical, jihadist realms and both he and Al Qaeda benefited from it. Abu Hanieh, a former Islamist, put it this way:

“Before anyone knew who he was, here was the secretary of state of the world’s most powerful government saying Zarqawi was important. Now his fame would extend throughout the Arab world, from Iraq to Syria to the Maghreb and the Arabian Peninsula. People were joining al-Qaeda because of him” (Warrick 98).

Now, on the eve of the arrival of American troops in Iraq, Zarqawi had been turned from nobody into one of the most wanted radical jihadists in the world and he was now going to use this fame to make America’s worst terrorism fears a reality.

The 2003 American invasion of Iraq was a godsend for Al Qaeda. Up to the invasion, Al Qaeda had become broken and fragmented in Afghanistan and needed a rejuvenation of its image and a distraction to divert some of the U.S.’s attention away from Afghanistan. Iraq provided that and more because it “validated the Al Qaeda narrative that the United States was bent on subjugating Islam and proved to be a rallying cry that attracted money and young men at a level that dwarfed the anti-Soviet Afghan Jihad” (Byman 115). 2003 was thus the beginning of a quagmire that thirteen years later has led to a situation that is arguably worse than the situation Iraq was in under Saddam Hussein’s regime. The initial invasion of Iraq and the ousting of Saddam Hussein from power took less than two months, but the insurgency that arose afterwards, waged on for years and is arguably still going on to this day. Zarqawi and his forces played a key role in extending this violence and also continually ratcheting up
how brutal it became. Following the invasion there were many groups that targeted U.S. and allied soldiers, but on August 7, 2003, the situation in Iraq would take a step down a more sinister path. On this day, seventeen civilians were killed when a car bomb was detonated outside of the Jordanian Embassy in what would be the first of many overt attacks on strictly civilian targets. This was Zarqawi’s entrance into the Iraqi conflict and the strategy of mindlessly killing civilians, for the sole purpose of striking fear into the population and undermining the U.S. reconstruction efforts would be the bulk of his playbook from here on out. While certainly not the first civilians to die in the conflict and sadly nowhere near the last to die either, the events that unfolded on that August day only added to the growing sense of unease and distrust of the American troops. Zarqawi would continue to capitalize on these feelings through numerous and seemingly endless attacks that drove the situation in Iraq not towards reconstruction, but towards further chaos. Following the August 7th attack there would be two more attacks within the month of August that would continue to change the direction of the conflict. This first succeeding attack would be the deadliest attack ever on a United Nations facility after twenty two people died in an attack on their headquarters in Baghdad. Next there would be an attack during Friday prayers at one of the prominent Shi’ite mosques in the town of Najaf, just south of Baghdad. The total body count for this attack was 85 worshippers killed and hundreds more injured. All of these attacks were strategically placed and expertly timed so that they occurred within a few days of each other and all within the time frame of one month. Soon after the bombing of the UN headquarters, their workers were drawn back because of the growing safety concerns about the current stability of the country. Attacks like the one in Najaf, helped fuel these feelings of instability because by directly targeting Shi’ite worshippers, Zarqawi made the Sunnis vulnerable to a retaliation attack, which is just what Zarqawi wanted. Everything seemed to be going right for Zarqawi, because as senior CIA terrorism analyst, Bruce Riedel said: “first he isolated us in Iraq, then he put us in the midst of a civil war” (Warrick 114). Now, a war that had been declared won by the President United States and a
reconstruction effort that was supposedly going according to plan, was now crumbling from its base because of the actions directed by one man, who had been unbeknownst to the world seven months ago. In essence, it was now Zarqawi who was dictating the direction of the war and not the Americans; because now it was an insurgency.

Zarqawi’s specialty as it turned out would be igniting sectarian violence in Iraq. This was because he, as well as many of the other jihadists working in Iraq, understood the demographic makeup of Iraq far better, at least initially, than the incoming Americans did. Therefore he exploited this advantage to the extreme and it turned out to be democracy in Iraq’s kryptonite. As it was in 2003, roughly 17% of Iraq’s population was Sunni Arabs, roughly 65% were Shi’ite Arabs, roughly 17% were Sunni Kurds and the smaller demographics of minorities like Christians, Assyrians, Yazidis, Turokmen, and many smaller ones made up the last percentage of the population (Weiss et al 25). During Saddam’s rule, he had kept the Sunni Arab minority in favorable positons, while subduing the economic and social opportunities of the Kurds and Shi’ites. However, when the oppressor was removed, the oppressed expected to be given more equal opportunities, but the previously privileged expected to keep all of their opportunities, because that’s what they were used to. They were two competing beliefs destined to come to blows, because perfect equality for every group was an impossible mark to meet. As Colonel Joel Rayburn saw it, the tipping point for violence, following the overthrow of Saddam’s Baathist regime, was when

“the Americans formed the Governing Council [in July 2003] with thirteen Shi’ite and only a few Sunnis, [and] people began to say, ‘The Americans mean to give the country to the Shia,’ and then they began to fight, and the tribes began to let Al Qaeda in” (Weiss et al 26).

Zarqawi then provided the outlet for the eventual frustrations to be vented through after he began his attacks on the Shi’ite communities, which snowballed into increased sectarian violence. As can be seen by the makeup of the initial Governing Council, there was a lack of understanding about the consequences that could occur from disenfranchising a community, that while indeed a minority, was
one that had been in power for so long that by immediately losing that power would cause resentment and ultimately alienate them to the point that feel the only way forward is to turn against you. Thirteen years later and these problems still exist and are being exploited by JTWJ’s eventual successor, the Islamic State. Specifically addressing these problems, in order to try and mend the scars caused by Zarqawi blowing the top off of the sectarian situation so long ago, will be the best path towards a long term solution. However, at this point in time, it would still be a long time before the situation became more favorable for the reconstruction effort, because for the remainder of 2003 and well into 2004 and 2005. Each month seemed to become deadlier than the last, largely because of Zarqawi, who in the time frame of 2003-2005 accounted for 42% of all of the suicide bombings that took place, according to a Jamestown Foundation study (Weiss et al 28). It truly had become the perfect storm for Zarqawi and he was making sure to get the most out of it. Former associate deputy director of operations at the CIA, Robert Richer described the situation, saying that Zarqawi’s group blossomed because “the fertile soil was Iraq after de-Ba’athification. The rain and sunshine were the ineptitude of the provisional authority and the U.S. misunderstanding of Iraqis and their culture” (Warrick 122). This ignorance helped fuel the social hatred of the occupying U.S. forces and the de-Ba’athification helped, through the lack of a functioning economy and thus availability of jobs, fuel the number of insurgency fighters. It was a continuous cycle where Zarqawi kept taking in more recruits and churning out more death and destruction, but he wanted more.

At the personal tally of Zarqawi himself, by January 2004 he claimed to have committed twenty five strikes that had all had devastating results, but now he was ready to take the next step. For this he believed that it was finally time to ask for the formal merging of the two jihadist’s groups, meaning he would finally pledge bayah (allegiance) to bin Laden as emir. Without Al Qaeda’s help, he had been able to isolate the Americans and ignite a sectarian conflict of civil war proportions between the Sunni and Shi’ite communities, all while achieving to funnel the blame for the cause of these attacks towards
the Americans. However, he wanted more, so in January of 2004 he penned bin Laden, asking for a formal truce and an alignment of resources. Through this alignment he hoped to officially complete his stated goals of “destabilizing Iraq, eliminating a hateful apostasy, and most important, forcing Sunnis to take up arms in a war that would lead to their liberation, an awakening of the slumberer and rousing of the sleeper” (Warrick 127-128). Bin Laden’s reply came later that year in a video where he announced the founding of a new branch of Al Qaeda called Tanzim Qaeda al Jihad fi Bilad al Rafidayn (Al Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers), in reference to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that converge in Iraq (Murad Batal 2005). Bin Laden and especially Zawahiri, still held on to their distaste of many of Zarqawi’s decisions, despite the merger, because in the end the merger was more about Al Qaeda latching on to a successful enterprise as its had fallen to the wayside due to the American onslaught following 9/11. One area of discord that Al Qaeda’s elite could never get over were the gruesome video beheadings that Zarqawi began to make, starting with the decapitation of Nick Berg, which was released in mid-2004. Just as Zarqawi had changed the game earlier in the war, taking terrorism to a whole new level of brutality by sending suicide bombers strictly after civilian targets for the sole purpose of instigating fear and loathing, he again amped up the brutality with this new display. As described by those who saw it, it was a slow, painful, and gory death that would be one of the most disturbingly iconic images of the Iraq war, but sadly it would not be the last of its kind. During the AQI era, there would be around a total of 80 such videos released containing hostages that high and low profile and they were all conducted in various environments, with some being public executions in front of occasionally cheering spectators on Iraqi streets (Stern et al 104). Ultimately, the world would eventually see these kinds of mindless and medieval acts on a more regular basis due to the actions of the Islamic State, who get their motivation of brutality from Zarqawi. However, following the Berg decapitation video and before his own approaching death, there were still many scars that Zarqawi would carve (Stern et al 02).
In the same video that bin Laden announced the official founding of the Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) branch, he gave Zarqawi his first, official orders by implying that he impede on the ‘apostate’ elections that were supposed to happen at the beginning of 2005. Up to the election he threatened to “wash the streets with blood” and while in terms of violence on the actual Election Day the statement was a failure, but the overall turnout or per say lack thereof, especially from the Sunnis, was another success for Zarqawi. Now, the Sunni minority would have an even lesser stake in the constitution that would be drawn up by those elected in the early 2005 election. By losing this opportunity, more seeds were sown for further sectarian frustrations down the line. However, before he got the chance to commit any more acts, he received a letter from Zawahiri and it was not to welcome him into the Al Qaeda fold. Instead, it claimed that:

“Zarqawi’s bloodthirstiness was beginning to damage the al-Qaeda brand among Muslims. It was fine to kill Americans and Iraqi soldiers, but the car bombings, the attacks on Shi’ite mosques, and the gory execution videos were sending the wrong messages. To ordinary Muslims, images of dead Shi’ite children and beheaded Bulgarian truck drivers were not inspiring, they were repulsive” (Warrick 185).

These were harsh words, but were ones that Zarqawi would not take to heart, because by this point he had developed a narcissist thought process that in his mind put him above any type of Islamic jurisprudence. Unbeknownst to him at the time, his last shot at igniting the civil war would be one of his deadliest, even without killing anyone directly. This is because on February 22, 2006, five of his men went and destroyed the thousand-year-old al-Askari Mosque, which resulted in “waves of killings and reprisal killings as rival bands of Shi’ites and Sunnis shot and hacked their way through the town, sometimes wiping out entire blocks” (Warrick 203). The end result would be over thirteen hundred dead and an Iraq on the verge of a declining into mass carnage, which, as can be seen in Figure 4.1, the overall, estimated death toll was fast approaching, depending on your interpretation of ‘mass carnage’. Later on, it was said that soldiers discovered a large trove of makeshift prison and torture chambers
Figure 4.1 is a representation of both the Department of Defense’s (blue columns) and the Iraq Body Count Project’s (red columns) estimated body count totals for Iraqi civilian casualties. It shows a steep increase in casualties from 2003-2006 (Zarqawi’s time in Iraq) and then a sharp decline in totals following Zarqawi’s death and then the beginning of the Anbar Awakening in 2007. However, it should also be noted that these death totals are once again on the rise, with 2013 seeing the highest estimates since 2008 (Byman 2013).

incarcerating many Sunni men who had been severely beaten and tortured (Warrick 205). It was a worst nightmare find because it solidified Zarqawi’s plan of spreading sectarian violence and showed that the general population was buying into it too. The powder keg was packed with explosive forces, but the U.S. hoped to douse the situation with water, which to them meant killing Zarqawi. They got their shot on June 7, 2006 and did not waste any time taking it. Zarqawi was pronounced dead onsite, soon after the airstrike (Warrick 217-218).
As a technical branch of Al Qaeda, AQI was one of the fragmented pieces that focused on a specific topic, in AQI’s case it was Iraq, and reported to Al Qaeda Central. While at this point in time, the decentralized, organic structure had been implemented, Zarqawi did not make much use of connecting with others; largely because of his narcissism, which made him believe he was superior to anyone and everyone else. Additionally, that meant that within AQI, the structure was strictly hierarchical with Zarqawi at the helm making all of the major decisions himself. Therefore, the U.S. hoped that this would be a classic case of cutting the head off of the snake, but just as with Al Qaeda Central, AQI had also become adept at quickly appointing a new leader after one fell. So instead of floundering about following his death, AQI was soon following orders from a new leader, Abu Ayyub al-Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajir), who would take AQI further down the path to becoming what is today the Islamic State. The focus of the next chapter will be AQI at the beginning of al-Masri’s reign and will address all of the events surrounding the group up to the current operation being conducted by U.S. and allied forces to counter the Islamic State’s recent gains.
V: The Islamic State

From the area just north of Aleppo, to the western outskirts of Baghdad, and then to the land just east of Damascus, along with the majority of the area in between is what the Islamic State considers its borders. Except the Islamic State does not recognize borders, because borders, like the ones drawn up by apostate, Western regimes during the Sykes-Picot Agreement, separate the overarching ummah and give more credence to sacrilegious rulers than God himself. Therefore, they want to destroy these borders and re-unite the ummah by spreading what they believe is the true interpretation of Islam across the world. With much attribution to their benefactor, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Islamic State is taking many of his original dreams, most notably his ultimate goal of re-establishing Islam in society, and fulfilling them in ways that Zarqawi never could. Following Zarqawi’s death, Al Qaeda in Iraq did not fold, much to the frustration of the United States, and instead bounced back with much resiliency to replace their brutally narcissistic founder. However, Zarqawi’s actions would eventually catch up with the group soon after his demise. Just as Ayman Al-Zawahiri had predicted, the brutal and mindless killing of fellow Muslims, no matter their ideology, would never be found palatable by the larger, more moderate Sunni Muslim community. The 2007 Anbar Awakening was the apex of this revolt and the result of this was the almost, complete eradication of AQI in Iraq by 2009. However, just as before, the group adapted and would find safe haven in the neighboring country of Syria with porous borders and population with a growing sense of unhappiness and displeasure with their current socioeconomic situations. Both circumstances would prove vital to the reinvigoration of the Zarqawi brand that by now had taken on a slew of other names as the group tried to rebrand and attempted to legitimately establish an Islamic state.

The Arab Spring, first in Syria and then in Iraq, would prove to be vital incubators for the group and allowed them to safely regain strength. Through the exploitation of the unrest and eventual chaos
that ensued in both nations, what is now the Islamic State, was able to build up its strength, expand its influence, and ultimately begin to hold and govern territory in an internationally unrecognized, pseudo-state. This final case study will look at the rise of power from AQI immediately following Zarqawi’s 2006 death and the appointment of Abu Ayyub al-Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) as his replacement up to the modern day Islamic State, which is currently being pushed back on its former gains by the coalition members of Operation Inherent Resolve. Specifically, this chapter will focus on how the group was initially beaten back during the Anbar Awakening, but then able to rebound by exploiting continued, underlying sectarian divides in Iraq and also Syria. The study will also look at how the organizational structure, ideologies, and overall goals changed as the group went being a rogue terrorist group to a self-acclaimed caliphate, and then finally how they rule this self-acclaimed caliphate and what its current structure may mean for its future demise. Overall, the accomplishments and grotesque tactics of the Islamic State have far surpassed anything that Zarqawi was able to achieve in Iraq with both Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad and AQI. Except, Zarqawi’s seemingly never ending thorn in the side of the American plans from 2003-2006 was eventually taken out and even though the Islamic State has proven to be a bigger and spikier thorn, they too can be eradicated.

Contained in the letter from Zawahiri that lambasted his attacks on Shi’ite civilians and the way that he broadcasted them, was also a piece of advice that he focus on a quest to establish an Islamic caliphate in Iraq. Specifically, Zawahiri told him to

“establish an Islamic authority or emirate, the develop it and support it until it achieves the level of a caliphate –over as much territory as you can to spread its power in Iraq, i.e. in Sunni Arab areas, is [sic] in order to fill the void stemming from the departure of the Americans, immediately upon their exit and before un-Islamic forces attempt to fill this void” (Fishman 2011).

Zarqawi took this to heart and it would eventually become an instruction that Zawahiri would come to regret. As can be seen, Zarqawi was never able to complete this task, but his successors, starting with Masri, would trudge onward towards establishing a caliphate. Right around the time that Masri was
chosen to succeed Zarqawi, there was the formation of a group known as the Mujahideen Shura Council. This council was created to align many of the small, Sunni radicalized jihadists group in Iraq, in order to create a stronger force. Despite its past success in dramatically altering the course of America’s reconstruction plans on its own, AQI had reached the pinnacle of its ability to gain followers and finance itself. So to increase its overall strength and influence, Masri aligned AQI with the council and pledged bayah to its appointed leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. As a side note, this was the only leader who he pledged bayah to, which meant he never pledged to bin Laden. The importance of this is that in tribal code, bayah must be pledged by each concurring leader of an organization, and cannot be carried over. In technical terms this then meant by not pledging allegiance to Al Qaeda’s leader, AQI was technically no longer aligned with Al Qaeda Central, meaning it was no longer tied to their rulings. Additionally, none of Masri’s successors would pledge bayah to Al Qaeda, meaning that the two groups, in minute technicalities, severed their ties with the death of Zarqawi and long before Zawahiri’s eventual public severing of ties in 2014. Regardless, pledging allegiance to Baghdadi was an important step in the process that would lead to the Islamic State for two reasons, the first being the obvious increase in strength and the second being that the members of the council named their conglomerate of groups, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). At this point, the similarities between the Islamic State of Iraq and todays, Islamic State were only in their branding, but it was still a step towards the goal Zarqawi had taken to heart.

After rebranding on the outside as ISI, Masri began instituting changes internally too, particularly in how the group was structured and their goals. By transforming in the Islamic State of Iraq, it now became more of a priority to focus on the idea of state building and for that he decided he needed to gain more Iraqi participation. In order to garner this support, the decision was made to not focus as much on American targets, but to now focus more on Iraqi military bases, as well as other jihadist groups and, like with Zarqawi, to continue to hit the Shi’ites. The ultimate goal was to either
scare people into supporting them or as a show of force, prove to those willing to fight that ISI was the winning team and had the power to represent their wishes. All of the while, Al Qaeda Central was weary of the changes in targets, but with the leaders being holed-up thousands of miles away, still hiding from the Americans, there was little that they could do to prevent their branches from slowly splintering off. As successor to Zarqawi, Masri was considered the emir of AQI, which under the new alliance meant that he reported to Abu Omar. This is because ISI was structured so that Abu Omar was at the top and all of the aligned organizations reported to him as being in control of one of the six zones that Baghdad and the immediate surrounding region, also known as the belts, were divided into. Within these zones, there were multiple smaller cells, like for example a northern AQI cell, etc. and each of the leaders of these cells reported to the emir of their controlling group who then reported to the emir of ISI. This structure was a very rudimentary rendering of the beginning of state building, by having zones be somewhat like independent provinces who took orders from an overarching leader. They also added what they dubbed ministries to each of their new zones and each ministry dealt specifically with economic and social tasks like agriculture, oil, and health. The likelihood that these individual ministries performed very many meaningful or worthwhile tasks within ISI is highly unlikely, but to prospective new members looking to join, it gave off the impression of legitimacy. Abu Ghazwan, a senior AQI leader who controlled a number of their cells, saw it this way too because believed that,

“we [ISI] are running the district, the people’s affairs, and the administrative services and we have committees to run the district headed by my brother” (Weiss et al 66).

Regardless of whether or not they were correctly, if at all, running districts is unknown, but to propagate their appearance of doing so, they added a flag in early 2007. As self-justification for the move, Brookings Fellow, William McCants quoted the group as citing the 19th Century Ottoman historian, Ahmad Cevdat Pasha when he said that,

“the secret in creating a flag is that it gathers people under a single banner to unify them, meaning that this flag is a sign of coming together
of their words and a proof of the unity of their hearts. They are like a single body and what knits them together is stronger than the bond of blood relatives” (McCants 20-21).

This sense of unity is something that ISI desired as an umbrella organization that had recently combined multiple groups. The addition of the flag also gave them the ability to mark their six zones of control, somewhat of a parallel to how a street gang would mark their territory. Lastly, the flag was designed to represent their hardline, Islamic beliefs by mimicking what they believe the Prophet’s flag looked like; black with the saying, “No god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God” written in white (Figure 5.1) (McCants "How ISIS Got Its Flag” 2015). Despite the flag and bureaucratic imitations, ISI was still far from being a state or even a representation of one, but just like with the initial rebranding to ISI, these structural changes were yet another step towards the more tangible application that would come about when today’s Islamic State was founded. Before this founding would happen though, all of the steps that they had previously taken forward were about to be erased away as the beginning of the Anbar Awakening was fast approaching at the beginning of 2007.

The Anbar Awakening would have many consequences for both sides involved. At the time of its implementation, the Anbar province of Iraq was largely under the control of AQI and was a safe haven for the group to conduct terrorism activities from. By the end of the Awakening, also known as the Sahwa, the Anbar province, as well as the majority of Iraq had been cleansed of AQI and its ISI counterpart. Their absence would be terse though, because once the Sahwa ended and the U.S. troop surge that was paired with the operation began to be scaled back, new opportunities arose for ISI to reinsert itself into the fold. These opportunities would be the result of a rushed U.S. exit strategy and a corrupt, Shi’ite led, government in Iraq who, once the Americans left, re-alienated the predominantly Sunni population in the Anbar Province. This alienation, once again, made hard line Islamists desired company in the province, because they could both protect the community and stand up to the now, oppressive Shi’ite government. Overall as contrasts, just as its properly orchestrated beginning led to
Figure 5.1 is a depiction of the Islamic State’s flag, which contains the saying, “No god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God” on top and the bottom figure is a copy of the Prophets seal he used on letters. The scribbled calligraphy of the flag is supposed to suggest an era before the precision of Photoshop, even though the flag was designed on a computer.

Source: (McCants “How ISIS Got Its Flag” 2015)

ISI’s demise and near annihilation, the Anbar Awakening’s botched conclusion would be a leading cause to ISI’s revitalization.

The answer to the question about how the local population felt towards ISI’s newly implemented government structure came in the form of the Anbar Awakening. This is because the movement began not as a U.S. strategy, but one of the Iraqi people who were becoming restless under the medieval and Sharia inspired rule of the newly formed ISI. In a strange turn of events, it was exactly as Zawahiri had predicted, during his castigation of Zarqawi and his brutal tactics, but the Sahwa itself
began as a result of the group’s carrying out the strategy of state building that Zawahiri had suggested. Regardless, the Sahwa was important for its bottom-up instead of top-down implementation because instead of the Americans having to ask for support from the local tribes, the local tribes came to the Americans saying they could help them get rid of the terrorists. One such example was the tribal leader Abdul Sattar al-Rishawi, who came to the Americans in 2007 out of his own self-interest, even after having his house raided twice by U.S. forces for terrorism allegations, to tell them that: “I swear to God, if we have good weapons, if we have good vehicles, if we have good support, I can fight Al Qaeda all the way to Afghanistan” (Weiss et al 71). While overzealous in his ambitions to take the fight from his hometown to over 1,300 miles away, the drive was contagious and he was not alone. Inquiries for help came from all over, even from the so called affiliates of ISI, like a Salafi Jihadist group called Ansar al-Sunna (Helpers of the Sunna), whose emir approached U.S. forces saying: “We have watched you in Anbar for three and a half years. We have concluded that you do not threaten our faith or our way of life. Al Qaeda does” (Weiss et al 72). Overall, hundreds of other tribal leaders also began to see that the raping and pillaging culture and oppressive governing style of ISI did not comply with what their own views of how a post-Saddam Iraq should look. The Americans were gracious for the warming of relations and responded with what became known as ‘the surge’.

The surge was both a legitimate surge in troops and a complete change in tactics of the troops on the ground. There were an additional five combat brigades, totaling around 20-30,000 troops total, sent to Iraq and specifically the surrounding Baghdad belts, where the deepest AQI/ISI roots lied. The specific details of the year by year troop increases and their effects, provided by Brookings, can be seen in Figure A.1 of the Appendix (O’Hanlon 2011). Paired with this strength of numbers, was a new strategy that included engaging the population more than had been done before. This, controversially so, increased the number of overall troop deaths, which was also expected because of the increase in
the overall number of troops in the country. Overall, the fundamental aspects of the surge, as described by the White House at the time were to:

1. Let the Iraqis lead
2. Help Iraqis protect the population
3. Isolate extremists
4. Create space for political progress
5. Diversify political and economic efforts
6. Situate the strategy in a regional approach.

Source: (Office of the Press Secretary 2007)

As was detailed in the first aspect, the engaging of the Iraqi people and forces was fundamental to the hopeful success of the new strategy, because after all, they had been the ones to suggest it was time to change the situation and not the other way around. While at the time more deadly, the greater interaction would eventually pay dividends a few years down the road when the Sunni leaders and population who had largely boycotted the 2005 election, participated in the 2009 election in exponentially increased amounts. A specific example of which was that al-Rishawi’s brother earned a seat on the Anbar Provincial council, which beforehand had been largely Shi’ite after the Sunni population did not properly represent themselves in the prior election (Weiss et al 78). The easing of tensions between the Sunni and Shi’ite populations was another key component and the U.S. hoped to speed up this process by building massive, concrete barriers throughout a large majority of the belts in and around Baghdad. While very divisive and colonialist looking in their implementation, the wall helped limit the sectarian violence that particularly AQI, even following the death of Zarqawi, was still bent on igniting. Overall, by 2010 the Pentagon reported that,

“U.S. forces had either picked up or killed 34 out of the top 42 (81%) Al Qaeda in Iraq leaders. They’re (AQI) clearly now attempting to reorganize themselves. They’re struggling a little bit... They’ve lost connection with [Al Qaeda senior leadership] in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Weiss et al 78).”

The success, in the terms of the overall body count, was conspicuous because by 2010 there were significantly less deaths in Iraq for both U.S. forces and Iraqi citizens than there had been in 2007, at the
beginning of the Sahwa and surge. When looking back on the overall picture of the Iraq War, one can
draw a parallel to a whack-a-mole game, because when the radicalized jihadists were stamped out in
one area, they seemed to pop back up later in another area. In this case, while succeeding in stamping
out the radicals’ influence on the ground in the Iraqi provinces, the U.S. was simultaneously providing an
incubator for their resurrection following its departure. This is because for every suspected AQI/ISI
member or affiliate that it did not kill was incarcerated in massive prisons, like Camp Bucca. It was in
these detention centers where jihadists were not de-radicalized, but instead radicalized further, while
making connections with other jihadists that they would not have been able to make out on the streets.
So while succeeding in the quelling of violence in the present, the U.S. was simultaneously helping
create a more violent future.

As one former jihadist interviewed by The Guardian said:

“We could never have all got together like this in Baghdad, or anywhere
else; it would have been impossibly dangerous. Here (Camp Bucca), we
were not only safe, but we were only a few hundred [meters] away
from the entire al-Qaida leadership” (Weiss et al 86).

This former jihadist also went on to describe how the former prisoners would write the contact
information of others they met in prison on their underwear, so following their release they could
contact them on the outside, making it easy to transition back into the lifestyle that had gotten them
imprisoned in the first place. Also, as an unfortunate side effect to sweeping up anyone that had the
smallest of possibility of having terrorism ties meant that there were many individuals who entered the
prison as non-supporters of the groups, but left the prison fully instructed jihadists. On the flip side of
incarcerating people who did not deserve to be incarcerated, the prisons were also releasing people
who did not deserve to be released. As was laid out in the White House’s original six points of the surge
strategy, overtime the U.S. and its allies would slowly transfer control over to the Iraqi government, who
at this time was headed by the Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki. Maliki and the U.S. had a hard time
seeing eye to eye and thus had many different sticking points, one of which was Maliki belief, according to Colonel Joel Rayburn, that:

“as of 2008 and 2009, we (U.S.) were just holding innocent people who had been caught up in a sweep. The big problem was, we would capture someone based on intelligence – either signals intelligence or human intelligence - and then not be able to share our methodology with the Iraqis to explain why the captured dude was a bad dude. If it was intelligence where you had to take out all the sources, the Iraqis would say, ‘based on whose say-so?’ They’d dismiss it. The entire Iraqi legal system runs on the authority of witness testimony. If you get two witnesses to say something, then it’s unshakable” (Weiss et al 88).

AQI/ISI then became experts on exploiting this ‘trust’ system and according to Rayburn eventually even established a ministry within the organization that solely dealt with either breaking or bribing members out of prison. Despite beginning to realize what Maliki was doing, the U.S. could not do much to inhibit him, because their remaining power resided largely with inhibiting sectarian violence between the Sunni and Shi’ite militias, of which many of the Shi’ite ones had government backing. Unfortunately, these militias with government backing or at least immunity from being stopped, were just the starting point for the future sectarian problems that Maliki, who was all too eager to see a complete U.S. withdrawal, would incite.

An interesting note about Nouri al-Maliki was that before the U.S. removal of Saddam from power, Maliki had spent twenty years in political exile in Syria and Iran after being forced out of Iraq by Saddam because of his involvement with the underground Shi’ite opposition to his regime (“Who is Nouri al-Maliki?” 2014). As is readily apparent, he did not forget these trying times with the past Sunni-Ba’athist leader and carried his mistrust of the entirety of the Sunni ethnic group into office with him. On the other hand, his own Shi’ite backing and time in Iran meant that as the U.S. and their influence waned, the neighboring Iranians were there to take their place. This meant bad times were ahead for the Sunni politicians in power and the Sunni population as a whole. The trouble began nearly immediately following the official U.S. troop withdrawal on December 18, 2011 because on the 19th,
Maliki issued an arrest warrant for his Sunni vice president, Tariq Hashimi, on terrorism charges (Healy 2011). Prior to this power move, Maliki had been slowly alienating and pushing out lower level Sunni politicians that had gotten in to the political system following the Sahwa, but this was on a new, unprecedented level in the eyes of the Sunnis. To them, this was subversion of cataclysmic proportions, so the remaining Sunni politicians began a boycott that trickled down from parliament to the streets. Instead of backing down, Maliki continued his purges, next targeting his Sunni Finance Minister, Rafei al-Essawi in December 2012 on similar terrorism charges (Tawfeeq 2012). By now, sectarian tensions in Iraq had reached a boiling point and elsewhere in the Middle East, the Arab Spring was igniting other protests, which only fueled the Sunni drive to protest their own oppression. These protests only grew as Maliki’s disenfranchisement of the Sunni populace put more and more individuals out of work, giving the protests both more supporters and more points of contention to protest about. By now, conditions had gotten bad and the protestors desperate for change, but the response to protest in Hawija on April 23, 2013 would push them over the edge. April 23rd was the first time Maliki used violence against the protestors, who he believed were being driven by insurgents, and while his government reported only five deaths, the significantly less biased Human Rights Watch reported them to be in the hundreds. It was the perfect catalyst to drive the protestors to the previously depleted ISI insurgents who had regained strength in neighboring Syria and were looking to make a comeback in Iraq. Maliki had reopened the sectarian divide that Zarqawi had driven through the heart of Iraq years before and by doing so he had practically personally invited ISI back into Iraq. However, when looking at Emma Sky’s, a British advisor to the U.S. Military in Iraq, comment that “corrupt regimes and terrorists keep each other in business,” then Maliki’s actions are not all that surprising (Weiss et al 20). By April 23rd, though, the comeback had already begun because at protests in Ramadi in March of that year, the infamous black flag with the white slogan had appeared (Smith 2014). ISI was back.
According document dubbed “The Strategic Plan for Reinforcing the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq”, created in early 2010, ISI boldly predicted that the time for their act of resurgence would be after the American withdrawal from the country (McCants 79-80). Specifically, the document is cited as saying: “When the Americans withdraw within two years (stated in 2010)... the situation will be strongest politically and militarily for the Islamic plan to prepare to completely seize the reins of control over all of Iraq” (McCants 79-80). Prior to attempting to make good on this aspiration, ISI would continue to fall on hard times in 2010. The climax of these downtrodden times would be when Masri, still the leader of Aqi and Abu Omar, still the leader of ISI were jointly killed in an airstrike in April, 2010. As always, the hope was to decapitate the group by taking out its top leaders and by effectively taking out ISI’s two most important ones, along with a cadre of other key figures, they very nearly did so. In a scramble to fill this new void a man named Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai was chosen to take the reins of ISI, but the world would learn to know him by his nom de guerre, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Baghdadi was born into an Iraqi Salafist family, but is believed to have not become radicalized until the U.S. invasion in 2003. Additionally, his radicalization is believed to have not been a violent one as he was never dubbed to be an actual threat to the U.S. and only became known to the U.S. after he was picked up and jailed following a 2005 raid targeting more high level insurgents. As described by prison guards who oversaw his stay in Camp Bucca, he was quiet and one of the many non-trouble makers that seemingly got rounded up unintentionally. Unfortunately, his stay would be a textbook example of someone who exited the jail much more of a threat than when he entered it. Upon entering Buccas he was not a member of ISI, but due to his experiences within the jailing system he would be drawn towards increased radicalization and leave the prison with contacts to help him achieve this once he was freed. Once free, he immediately sought out and joined ISI and as can be seen, would become one their most important recruitments. Baghdadi was unique though, because unlike many of his jihadist comrades, he was extensively educated after receiving a doctorate in Islamic Law from the University of
Islamic Sciences (Weiss et al 117). This quality actually made him more credible, in Islamic terms, than both Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri, neither of which ever had formal Islamic training anywhere close to the degree of Baghdadi’s. This Islamic credibility would then be one of the key reasons that ISI chose him as the successor to Abu Omar and was a choice that would prove vital for them when Baghdadi later declared the group’s establishment of a new Islamic caliphate, with himself as the caliph. This lauded accomplishment though would be many years down the line and after inheriting the group at arguably its lowest point since it was forced out of Afghanistan in the early 2000’s.

By inheriting the crippled group, Baghdadi had the opportunity to mold it into an organization that fit his liking, which started with placing his trusted allies, many of which he met while in Camp Bucca, in key positions. Somewhat ironically, many of these men were former Ba’athists under Saddam and by being part of this secular ideology were people that the former leader Zarqawi had grouped under his hardline definition of *kuffar* (apostates/un-believers). Zarqawi would have most likely staunchly opposed this seemingly unholy alliance, but by aligning with these men ISI would be able to develop a stronger military force and a better organized organization than it had ever had before. One thing that Zarqawi would not have shied away from the Ba’athists on was their equal hatred of the Shi’ites, who they had massacred and oppressed through Saddam’s regime. An exemplification of their possible equal hatred of the ethnic group is shown through the slogan the Ba’athists placed on Iraqi tanks during the quelling of Shi’ite protests in the 1990’s: “La Shi’a ba’d al-yowm” (No Shia after Today) (Weiss et al 123). In all, the Ba’athist, Salafist jihadi marriage would be a fruitful one for both sides, because both agree in their hatred of the Shi’ite majority and both wanted to establish a new state with them in control of it. Albeit they each wanted a state for different reasons, the Salafists for religious purposes and the Ba’athists for personal gain, but each brought skill sets to the table that the other
lacked, which allowed Baghdadi to eventually take ISI to the next level. To begin this resurgence, Baghdadi would have to expand into Syria.

Just as the Sunni unrest in Iraq was turning into legitimate protests in 2012, the situation in Syria, which also began with peaceful protests by the disenfranchised, had escalated into a full blown civil war. This civil war destabilized the entire country, causing the leader, Bashar al-Assad to lose control over a significant portion of his country to rebel factions. Initially, the main group leading the armed resistance was the Free Syrian Army (FSA), formed in mid-2011 and made up of deserting members of the Syrian military who refused to carry out crimes against humanity in the name of the Assad regime. Not too long after the FSA was founded there began to be infighting between its members, causing the group to splinter and ultimately have many small factions break off to go form their own brigades for various reasons. Once this splintering occurred and the Syrian crisis deteriorated into further chaos, Baghdadi began looking at the situation as an opportunity to breathe new life into his struggling brand. Despite the ongoing crisis, looking into expanding into Syria was not a far out concept, largely because jihadist recruitment networks had been funneling recruits from inside Syria into Iraq during the initial U.S. invasion. This was even done with the facilitation of the Syrian government, who under the anti-American Assad intended to help fuel the undermining of America’s plans. At its height in 2007, U.S. officials estimated that 85-90% of the total foreign fighters that were in Iraq had entered the country through Syria (McCants 85). Then in early 2012, Baghdadi decided flip the pipelines flow and sent a group of jihadists under the leadership of Abu Mohammad al Jawlani, who happened to be a Syrian born member of AQI, into Syria to set up an operation. Once there, Jawlani founded the group Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) and began to insist that he had no links to either ISI or Al Qaeda (Lister Brookings 2014). While in Syria, JAN followed many of the same tactics as AQI and ISI before it, by blatantly targeting civilians, as well as other jihadist groups in order to either destroy them or scare them into submission. However, just like with what eventually happened to AQI/ISI, the brutal
attacks on civilians eventually alienated their support base, so they switched tactics to a more cooperative approach. Now, they decided to work closer with rival groups, like the FSA, instead of trying to push them out of the way. This strategy worked a lot better for JAN, because now they had a bigger support and recruiting base and formed a bigger foe to the Assad regime. Ousting the Assad regime was JAN’s top priority, but also like ISI, it had plans to establish an Islamic state too. With its new change in strategy it was beginning to become successful in this area too by now winning over local Syrians, who were beginning to view JAN as “fair arbitrators when dealing with corruption and social services”, among many other governing aspects (Zelin 2013). It was now considered a legitimate, if not leading, part of the resistance against Assad and had begun to rival ISI for power and influence in the region.

The resounding success that JAN had in Syria, in a little under a year, had caught Baghdadi’s attention and he ultimately decided that it was time to corral the man he had originally sent over. To do this, Baghdadi made an official announcement on April 9, 2013 saying that ISI and JAN would be merging into one new group named the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). It was a move very akin to when AQI joined the movement to make the Mujahideen Shura Council, which turned in ISI. This is because Baghdadi envisioned that he would be the overarching leader of ISIS and JAN would be a subset of it, just like AQI had been a subset of ISI. The only problem with the declaration was that neither Jawlani nor Zawahiri, who was now in charge of Al Qaeda following the death of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011, knew about it beforehand and both were caught off guard by it. To prove his point that he was not going to be underneath Baghdadi, Jawlani announced JAN’s allegiance to Zawahiri and Al Qaeda Central, which technically made JAN and ISIS equals as affiliates of Al Qaeda. In an effort to patch up the suddenly very contentious relationships between the three parties, Zawahiri sent a private letter, which was eventually found and made public by the media, telling the two groups that each were affiliates of the overarching Al Qaeda brand and that Baghdadi should focus on his operations in Iraq and Jawlani in
Syria (Stern et al 42). It was an expected statement, in order to corral a situation that could set an ugly precedent for other, unhappy Al Qaeda affiliates, but it was also surprising because by segmenting Baghdadi’s and Jawlani’s areas of operation to Syria and Iraq, Zawahiri was acknowledging their existence and in a way supporting the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Coming from the man that had initially sown the seed, in Zarqawi’s mind, of establishing an Islamic caliphate in place of the Western influenced boundaries, it was a sign of desperation. While not absolutely necessary to Al Qaeda’s long term survival, Zawahiri knew that having an affiliation with Baghdadi’s group would be more beneficial than having it as his enemy. Regardless, but as was expected, Baghdadi opposed Zawahiri’s ruling and the tensions between the groups continued to rise, with ISIS beginning to steal members away from JAN and eventually violently confront JAN in 2013. Then, by 2014 the two groups had begun their own violent conflict inside of the larger, more chaotic and violent conflict that Syria had turned in to. Eventually, the rift became too deep and Zawahiri finally played his hand, ending the fratricidal conflict by issuing a statement on February 2, 2014 officially stating that “ISIS is not a branch of the [Al Qaeda] group, we have no organizational relationship with it, and [Al Qaeda] is not responsible for its actions” (Stern et al 43). Now, after a total of ten years of official and tumultuous alignment, ISIS was officially out from under the thumb of Al Qaeda and the two groups would openly spar for domination of the jihadist market.

Throughout ISIS’s squabble with Al Qaeda, it constantly grappled with the fact that on the international jihadi stage, it was the underdog, up-and-comer and was constantly fighting for the notoriety it thought it deserved as the premier jihadist group. Nothing would epitomize this more than when on January 7, 2014 President Obama infamously released the statement downplaying the overall threat of ISIS, telling the world that: “I think the analogy we use around here sometimes, and I think is accurate, is if a JV team puts on Lakers uniforms, that doesn’t make them Kobe Bryant” (Kessler 2014). If there was anything that was going to put a chip on ISIS’s shoulder, it was this. As it would turn out,
either by coincidence, another miscalculation by U.S. intelligence services, or a mixture of both, 2014 would go on to become ISIS’s biggest year, in terms of gaining notoriety and territory. Along the way, it gained riches as it robbed banks, citizens, and acquired other economic assets like oil fields and then military assets like American made weapons and vehicles, which essentially gave this ‘JV team’ their Laker jerseys. ISIS began its 2014 offensive by officially consolidating control over what would later become its capital city, Raqqa, Syria. From here it would spread its influence outward and develop a successful strategy of infiltrating a town non-militarily to gain support from the town’s population, so when their troops arrived, the town would not oppose their arrival and also help in the overthrowing of the group that controlled that town at the time. An early textbook example of this for the group was with the northern Syrian town of Manbij. It developed its first major presence in the town when it was still aligned with JAN in 2013 and initially benefitted from the JAN forces that protected the town. From this base, it is believed that ISIS representatives began reaching out to the local population and inviting them to its *madhafa* (meeting place) to openly learn about Baghdadi’s long term Islamic project to reunite the region under one, Islamic nation Weiss et al 222). Next, it began to grow its presence in the town by secretly renting and/or taking over houses to be used as secret weapon and ammunition stockpiles, in preparation for its future military invasion (Weiss et al 222). As it slowly began to build up its presence it began to come into direct confrontation with the other rebel groups occupying the town towards the latter half of 2013. ISIS would then officially monopolize its power in the town in January, 2014, following its official capture of Raqqa. Once in control, the town was put under the governance of strict Sharia Law, which while brutal in its incorporation, was effective at curtailing crime and was implemented on everyone living in Manjib, even its fighters. This ability to stay consistent with its rulings, albeit still brutal in their implementation, brought a sense of stability to the town, which to some residents, like Ayman al-Mit’ib, was the reason ISIS ultimately succeeded in taking it over. While living in Manjib both before and during ISIS’s rule, Ayman said that,
“there is no absolute support for its acts, but no opposition to its acts either. The reason why people support the Islamic State is its honesty and practices compared to the corruption of most of the FSA groups” (Weiss et al 224).

Later on, while talking to The Guardian, a Syrian army defector would compare ISIS’s strategy of infiltrating towns to that of a virus in that it would focus on the weak units in towns first and then slowly gain ground until it had taken out all of its rivals (Weiss et al 224). They operated like this in the grand scheme of things too, by spreading outward once it seized one town, until all of the surrounding towns were under its control. Raqqa thus became the epicenter from which ISIS spread its vicious and deadly virus and after securing its hold on eastern Syria, it began to infect its way into western Iraq.

ISIS developed an enhanced strategy when entering Iraq because while in Syria it had intentionally alienated itself from other groups, deciding to act alone than align with someone with lesser beliefs. In Iraq, this changed because it aligned itself with the disenfranchised Sunni tribes who had become fed up with Maliki’s oppression. Eventually, it would align itself with a group called the Military Council of the Tribes of Iraq, which was a coalition of around eighty tribes (Hassan 2014). This alliance gave it an open door into the predominantly Sunni, western portion of Iraq. One of their first, major gains was the capturing of Fallujah, a town that had been the site of some of the heaviest fighting during the U.S. occupation. Next on the list was Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul. Mosul, a city of around 1.5 million people fell to the advancing ISIS fighters and their Sunni tribesmen allies with little resistance as there were mass reports of Iraqi troops and police abandoning their guard posts and uniforms, choosing to flee rather than face the possibility of a brutal execution (Associated Press 2014). As significant of a gain as it was, ISIS was not satisfied and kept trudging its way towards the top prize, Baghdad. Soon after, the towns of Tikrit (Saddam Hussein’s birthplace), Al-Qaim, Rawa, Ana, and Husaybah also fell to ISIS, giving it a strong hold on a sizeable portion of northwestern Iraq. In Syria, it
Figure 5.2 shows the extent of the Islamic State’s influence at the end of 2014, which was the year that it made the majority of its major gains, like with the Iraqi city of Mosul. It was estimated that the extent of this territory was equivalent to around the combined size, land mass wise, of the islands of Great Britain. Source: (“ISIS Sanctuary: December 5, 2014” 2014)

continued to make gains as well giving itself a strong presence in Raqqa, Idlib, Deir al-Zour, and Aleppo by the end of 2014. Eventually, the Iraqi army slowed ISIS’s advance and stalled them in the town of Ramadi, roughly 70 miles away from the capital city and ultimate prize of Baghdad. In all, the damage ISIS had done in a little over a year’s time had netted them control of a total area, spanning two countries, about the size of Great Britain (Byman 09). For visual reference of their influence at the end of 2014, refer to Figure 5.2. The success that this group had was unparalleled to anything any previous group of its kind ever accomplished and to them, the gaining of the territory was not their biggest
success story, it was just a supplement to it. For ISIS, the real success story was that they now believed that the time had come to fulfill the goal that the great Osama bin Laden had never even accomplished; the establishing of the Caliphate.

On June 29, 2014 ISIS issued a statement claiming:

“Here, the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of monotheism rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala. Beneath it the walls of the tyrants have been demolished, their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed... It is a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim believer. It is a hope that flutters in the heart of every mujahid monotheist. It is the caliphate. It is the caliphate—the abandoned obligation of the era... Now the caliphate has returned. We ask God the exalted to make it in accordance with the prophetic method” (McCants 121-122).

To go along with the announcement, the now Islamic State, proclaimed that their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was now Caliph Ibrahim al-Baghdadi. Now, the importance of Baghdadi’s highly educated, theological past was coming into play. To legitimize the caliphate the rarely seen Baghdadi, now aptly nicknamed the Invisible Sheikh, traveled to the newly captured city of Mosul to lead prayers and give a televised sermon at the Nuri Mosque. To this date, it is the only public appearances made by Baghdadi. During his sermon Baghdadi reconfirmed the declaration of the caliphate while shrouded in all black, which many followers speculated was either a tribute to the black turban the Prophet Muhammad wore when he conquered Mecca or was to signify his on lineage ties with the Prophet (McCants 123). Following this bold and to many out of the blue declaration, there was an outpouring of rejection to the caliphate from the overwhelming majority of Sunni Muslims worldwide. There had not been a caliphate since the Turkish leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished the Ottoman Empire for the founding of the Republic of Turkey after World War I. For the majority of Sunni Muslims, the Islamic State did not represent their values or how they believed Islam should be practiced and thus condemned the caliphate instead of giving it the outpouring of support it desired. However, within Mosul and the other areas under its control, there would be no condemning of the caliphate. It was
either adherence to their rule or die. For example in Mosul, on the day of Baghdadi’s sermon, the men were threatened with lashes if they did not attend the prayer service. One woman in attendance said,

“we were frightened by the way he wore his black clothes. We had never seen a Sunni imam completely dressed in black clothes. We women were on the second floor crying, terrified that they would hear us and hurt us. We waited for an hour after the sermon, where there were armed men guarding the door” (McCants 124).

This display of force and deliberate fear mongering was just a taste of the brutal regime that the Islamic State would instill on Mosul and the rest of its acquired territory.

One of the reasons that they are able to instill so much fear and people and are so willing to do many of the outlandishly brutal things that they do is because they have no fear themselves. This is because they believe that by reestablishing the caliphate and reconnecting the ummah, they are fulfilling the prophecy of the apocalypse. By believing that they are single handedly bringing about the apocalypse means that believe in one way or another they will be dying in the near future and they just want to make sure they are aptly rewarded when they do, may it be through martyrdom or surviving until the last days. Therefore the End of Days is what everything they do in a day is centered on. They fight the kufar, who is listed by the Islamic State as anyone who does not follow the strict Sunni interpretations of the Quran that they do, because they believe that they need to purge their Islamic State of these apostates to make it legitimate. However, it believes that the Muslim deviants, which are the Shi’ite, Yazidis, and any other sect of Islam different from hardline Sunnis, should be dealt with before the non-Muslim apostates. This then goes along with Zarqawi’s initial belief in fighting the near enemy over the far enemy. This belief that these deviant groups must be exterminated in order for the End of Days to come is why they brutally kill with such intentness. Their long term goal is to then to either draw all of the non-Muslim powers to them or to continue advancing out of the Middle East and take the fight to them. However, to stick with their prophetic beliefs, they believe that at some point, which is fast approaching, there will be a massive battle at the town of Dabiq, Syria. It is here that they
believe the final battle before the Day of Judgement will occur. Zarqawi believed this and openly discussed it at times, which might have been a major reason why he bought so heavily into Zawahiri’s advice to reestablish the caliphate. Specifically, the Prophet Muhammad states that “the Hour (Day of Judgment) will not come until the Romans land at al-A’maq or in Dabiq. An army of the best people of the time will come from Medina against them” (McCants 102). The Islamic State believes that they are this Islamic army, despite not controlling Medina, and that the United States and its allies are modern day Rome. In their eyes, the ultimate goal is to fight the U.S. head on because they believe that no matter the odds of their forces winning, that they have the prophecy on their side and that in the end their beliefs will prevail. Until that time, they will continue to build up their state and in their eyes, legitimize their caliphate, which unfortunately includes the population under their control. As a self-proclaimed state, the Islamic State is structured in a top-down hierarchical structure with Baghdadi naturally at the top. As the appointed Caliph of the state, he is the ultimate decision maker for all religious, economic, and military rulings. Immediately below him, as is displayed in the Figure 5.3, is a deputy position that is essentially his right hand man in personally advising and assisting him on most matters.

Below the deputy position are two sub-deputies, not shown in the chart, of which one controls Iraq and the other controls Syria. As deputies over each of these respected areas, each wali (governor) of the wilayat (provinces) within each of the deputies’ areas report to them. To further break it down there are even mayor like leaders of qawati’ (townships) who report to each wali. On a level equal to the two sub-deputies is the eight man cabinet, who are in charge of managing the state’s activities like finances, prisoners and detainees, the transportation of suicide bombers to their deployment, operations using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and looking after the families of "martyrs", jihadists who fell in battle, among many other tasks deemed important by Baghdadi (Sherlock 2014). On the far side of the chart is the military council who are made up of Baghdadi’s military advisors.
Figure 5.3 shows the hierarchical structure of the Islamic State with Abu Bakr al Baghdadi at the top in the Caliph position, followed by his main deputy and right man. Then directly below Baghdadi is his seven member cabinet and directly below his first deputy are the governors of the various provinces that the Islamic State has declared within its territory.

Source: (Sherlock 2014)

Overall, a security analyst who has meticulously studied the Islamic State’s organizational structure describes it as Baghdadi is “a shepherd, and his deputies are the dogs who herd the sheep [the Islamic State’s members]” (Sherlock 2014). Many of these ‘dogs’ are former Saddam Ba’athists who have helped by providing the experience and knowhow needed to function a government. Without their experience, the argument could be made that the Islamic State would not have been able to hold on to
and ‘govern’ the territory that it gained, for as long as it has. The Islamic State also relies heavily on local
government officials already in place before it arrives, largely because it does not have the man power
to micromanage every small space that it acquires. However, it makes sure that the locals adhere to its
strict Sharia Law interpretation. Following their invasion of a town, if the Islamic State does not believe
that certain members of the population have proper education in their version of Sharia Law, they send
these individuals to take lessons from Salafi teachers installed at local mosques, according to an escapee
of the Islamic State occupation of Raqqa, Syria (Hisham 2016). The Islamic State then uses a variety of
fear mongering tactics to enforce its interpretations of Sharia Law. One of the first facilities established
when the Islamic State takes over a town is a place called Hudud Square, essentially the town square,
which is where all of its Sharia punishments, ranging from lashings to hand-loppings to beheadings to
 crucifixions take place (Weiss et al 224). By making these events public spectacles, it severely
diminishes the likelihood of revolts by the population out of a fear of punishment and an example of this
square can be seen in Figure 5.4, which is from the town of Tal Abyad on the Syrian-Turkish border. To
further diminish the likelihood of revolt the Islamic State disarms the local population saying that the
law and order they will provide will not require them to need to provide self-protection anymore.
Overall, there are many ways that the Islamic State continually dilutes the general population’s will to
revolt and it is largely masked through their implementation of religious, Sharia Laws.

As stated earlier, the Islamic State does not have the man power to have large amounts of
operatives running each individual area that it controls. However, one aspect that it does micromanage
and have operatives anywhere it can get them is with the religious police, otherwise known as al-Hisba.
Specifically, according the an Islamic State document, al-Hisba is intended to help “promote virtue and
prevent vice to dry up sources of evil, prevent the manifestation of disobedience, and urge Muslims
towards well-being” (Caris et al 2014). In reality it is very similar to, but not as extreme as, the religious
police in Saudi Arabia. This though is not the only Saudi influence in the Islamic State because in places
Figure 5.4 shows an example of a town square in the previously occupied town of Tal Abyad. This would have been where punishments ranging from lashings to executions, by beheading, would have taken place. As can be seen it is located at a roundabout and was likely in a central part of the town. The picture was taken by Washington Post reporter, Liz Sly, when she was able to walk through the town of Tal Abyad, soon after it was liberated from the Islamic State’s rule by a U.S. led coalition partnered with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG).
Source: (Engel 2015)
where the Islamic State has opened up schools, it has been reported that instead of writing their own textbooks, they just printed out Saudi textbooks they found online (McCants 136). In all, many of the practices of the Islamic State mirror those in Saudi Arabia, because both have many identical penalties for crimes, such as: death for blasphemy, homosexual acts, treason and murder; death by stoning for adultery; one hundred lashes for sex out of wedlock; amputation of a hand for stealing; amputation of a hand and foot for bandits who steal; and death for bandits who steal and murder (McCants 136). These striking resemblances cause many to call the Islamic State more of adherers to Wahhabism than Salafism. One such individual is Distinguished Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl, who claimed that the Islamic State is “co-opt[ing] the language and symbolism of Salafism [and Wahhabism]... until the two have become practically indistinguishable” (Abou El Fadl 79). Wahhabism is an ultraconservative Sunni movement centered on Saudi Arabia and strives to restore Islam to its pure roots of worship and strives for \textit{tawhid} (oneness with God). As can be seen it is very similar to the ideas of Salafism, minus the fact it is named after the scholar, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and is considered to be more fundamentalist than most Salafism ideologies. Regardless, of which ideology the Islamic State specifically adheres to, they are still ultra-fundamentalist and extremist. In terms of their implementation of Sharia Law, the Islamic State is very strict on their collection of Zakat, the religious tax that is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. The collection of this tax is estimated in the millions, due to the size of the population under the Islamic State’s control, and is just one of the many forms of revenue that allowed it to become the richest terrorist organization in the world.

In order to function like a legitimate state, one has to spend like one and in order to spend like one, one has to have the funds to do so. The Islamic State has the funds to do so and, at least for the meantime, the consistent revenue to keep doing so. As was previously stated, a large chunk comes from their Zakat collection. Another large portion comes from their exploitation of black market smuggling, largely with antiquities and oil. The prior-mentioned Ba’athists have also played a vital role in the
carrying out of these activities, particularly with the oil extraction and shipping. They also added to their revenue base by getting in to the hostage business, both at the local and international level, which even though the U.S. and U.K. emphatically oppose to paying for hostages, there are plenty of other countries that will. At one point in time, it was estimated that the Islamic State was bringing in between $1-3 million dollars a day, as a result of its many revenue outlets (Johnston 2014). They received large sums of cash from banks they robbed while taking over territory, in addition to gaining millions of dollars’ worth of military assets, most of which is U.S. made. All of this has helped differentiate the Islamic State from Al Qaeda, who relied predominantly, as they largely still do, on donor funds. As an insult to injury, the Islamic State benefits from these kinds of donations too. In all, having all of these sources of revenue allows the Islamic State to function as a state, but it also makes it more vulnerable to outside attack and ultimately its downfall.

In the eyes of the Islamic State, their control of territory and their continued source of revenue, a lot of the times through openly visible sources like oil wells, is there strength, but it is also there weakness. This is because by being a legitimate state, you can be attacked and you be visually diminished by losing territory. Unlike Al Qaeda who has been an underground organization since being run out of Iraq following 9/11, the Islamic State cannot pick itself up and move whenever and wherever it wants and retain its same form. In other words, when Al Qaeda lost its training camps in Afghanistan and Zawahiri and bin Laden had to go into hiding they were not defeated, only diminished, but by thinking of itself as a tangible state, if Baghdadi is run out of power and all of the sides of the Islamic State are closed in on each other, the Islamic State will not be diminished, it will no longer exist and will thus be defeated. This is what needs to be done and is what is beginning to be done right now, through Operation Inherent Resolve.

The Islamic State believes that it is a state and it believes that it is a state destined by God to help bring about the end of the world. Therefore, this is not a group that can be negotiated or reasoned
with, even if the United States negotiated with terrorists, and thus must be destroyed. As apocalyptic and brutal as that destructive rhetoric sounds, they are a group that, as reported by the U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, has and continues to commit systematic and widespread violence and abuses of international human rights law and humanitarian law. These acts may, in some instances, amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and possibly genocide" (Shah et al 2016).

In short, that is why they need to be eradicated. Initially, America was extremely limited in its response and only provided non-militant aid, like military MREs (Meals Ready to Eat), while the Syrian government barrel bombed civilians and the Islamic State tore across Iraq. This was during the years 2012-2014, when the Syrian civil was getting deadlier by the day and the Islamic State was at its peak. At the time the frustration by the rebels was explicitly expressed to Republican Senator, John McCain when he visited Syria in 2013 and was asked by one of the rebel officers if he (the officer) was “supposed to throw pizzas at those airplanes [regime forces]” (Warrick 292-293)? Sadly enough, because of this lack of support from the world’s strongest military force, many of these non-extremist groups had members switch allegiances to the better equipped and more powerful extremist groups, like the Islamic State. This is often not done out of an agreement with their ideology, but out of the necessity for better funding and a stronger resistance to the Syrian regime. However, now, through Operation Inherent Resolve, we are beginning to provide limited military support, through the conducting of airstrikes in Iraq and Syria (US Department of Defense 2016). The ultimate goal of the U.S. led coalition participating in Operation Inherent Resolve is the eventual eradication of the Islamic State and to complete this goal it is vital that we do not step back as we did in 2012-2014. Soon after its authorization by President Obama, U.S. Central Command released this statement detailing the meaning behind the name of the operation and its specific mission: “INHERENT RESOLVE is intended to reflect the unwavering resolve and deep commitment of the U.S. and partner nations in the region and around the globe to eliminate the terrorist group ISIL and the threat they pose to Iraq, the region and the wider
international community. It also symbolizes the willingness and dedication of coalition members to work closely with our friends in the region and apply all available dimensions of national power necessary - diplomatic, informational, military, economic - to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL” (US Department of Defense 2014).

As it currently exists, Inherent Resolve only encompasses the conducting of airstrikes on the Islamic State’s positions in both Iraq and Syria. Most notably, this excludes attacks on Bashar al-Assad’s forces, which has been a major sticking point with many of the Syrian rebels. At the moment, the U.S. is not officially aligned with and backing any major rebel groups within Syria. One reason is that the U.S. is very hesitant to provide support to any rebel group out the fear that its physical support could end up in extremists’ hands. To get around this fear, the U.S. has attempted to create a rebel group of its own, pledging $500 million in the summer of 2015 to train Syrian rebels to fight the Islamic State (ABC 2015). Overall, the plan has been fraught with failure, because it has been unable to attract enough recruits to reach its 5,400 trainees a year goal and the minimal amount it does train have been, for the most part, quickly killed or captured on the battlefield. A significant reason that the program is not succeeding in attracting a large number of recruits is because it is solely focused on fighting the Islamic State and not Bashar al-Assad. This is a point of contention with the Syrian population because all of the moderate rebel groups in Syria see Bashar al-Assad as the more imminent threat and want to kick him out of power before they focus their efforts on the Islamic State. The moderate rebel groups think this way because Bashar al-Assad and his barrel bombing of their communities is a significantly deadlier threat than the advance of the Islamic State. The Syrian Network for Human Rights’ report on deaths in Syria 2015 proved these fears to be true. They reported that the Syrian regime accounted for 12,044 civilian deaths, whereas the Islamic State accounted for 1,366 deaths (SNHR 2016). Again, these data are from 2015, meaning that if the death toll totals from the beginning of the conflict were shown, they would only be skewed further in favor of the Syrian regime as the primary threat. To the United States, which
has not had civilians or soldiers die at the hands of the Syrian regime, this differing viewpoint can be
difficult to relate to. Therefore by not being able to relate to the rebels in that sense, as well as the
involvement of international players, namely Russia and Iran, in the Syrian conflict who would be against
any U.S. bombing Assad’s forces, makes it very hard to find a middle ground of a strategy to agree on.

Regardless of the failure to always see eye to eye with the rebels, the U.S.’s current limited
scope of operations of focusing on the Islamic State in Operation Inherent Resolve has been very
successful. Per the most recent U.S. Department of Defense update on March 29th, 2016 there have
been a total of 11,230 airstrikes conducted by both the U.S. and coalition forces, since the beginning of
the operation on August 8, 2014 (US Department of Defense [airstrikes] 2016). As it stands, a total of
twelve countries, not including the United States, have participated in the airstrike campaign. Among
these nations are the Middle Eastern countries of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain, Turkey, and the United
Ara Emirates. The participation of these five countries is crucial to note, because they will all be vital in
the stabilization efforts that will be conducted following the Islamic State’s ultimate demise. However,
as it stands, that outcome is still a bit down the road, but the coalition has taken many large strides
towards obtaining it. Specifically, as of March 29, 2016 and as can be seen by referencing Figure 5.5,
there have been a total of 22,779 physical targets destroyed, all of which were associated with the
Islamic State’s operations in some capacity (US Department of Defense 2016). All of these strikes have
also been carried out in conjunction with allied ground forces, such as the Kurds, the Iraqi government
forces, and select, non-radical opposition groups in Syria. By coordinating the ground attacks with the
air strikes, it allows these allied forces to gain a significant advantage against entrenched Islamic State
forces. It has led to outstanding results too, with it being reported that between the dates of January 1-
December 15, 2015, the Islamic State lost control of 14% of its territory and in the last three months it
has lost a further 8% (Strack 2016). These losses can be seen in red, in Figure 5.6. Despite Figure 5.6
being update as of March 15, 2016, the area surrounding Palmyra should no longer be marked green for
Figure 5.5 shows the total amount of physical targets, belonging to the Islamic State, that have been destroyed by coalition member airstrikes conducted as part of Operation Inherent Resolve. Source: (US Department of Defense 2016)

advancement. Instead, it should be marked red for territorial loss because as of March 28th, 2016, it was reported that Syrian forces had recaptured the town and UNESCO World Heritage site (Hutcherson et al 2016). While the Islamic State is still far from being defeated, it is enlightening to know that at the moment, they are backtracking on the significant gains they achieved in 2014 and that their demise is actively occurring.

Anytime the Islamic State is defeated and loses territory, it good news, but in Palmyra it is more bittersweet news. This is because the group defeating the Islamic State the most in Syria is Bashar al-Assad’s forces and while the U.S. does not support gains by pro-Assad forces, they do support the protection of UNESCO World Heritage sites, like the Palmyra Roman ruins, which were in grave danger in the hands of the Islamic State. Sadly, the Islamic State fulfilled these fears of danger by destroying
Figure 5.6 depicts the territorial gains, losses, and area retained for the Islamic State from the beginning of 2015 to March 14, 2016. As stated before, the green area around Palmyra, shaded as territorial gains should instead be shaded red for territorial losses, because of the recent advancement of Syrian troops. Source: (Strack 2016)

various ruins in Palmyra and even killed a group of captives by tying them to columns and blowing them up. This is yet another example of the mindless barbaric actions that the group partakes in on a regular basis. However, the barbarousness and destruction is actually likely to increase as the Islamic State is forced to retreat. As they retreat, they will get more desperate as they are slowly constricted into a smaller space of control and essentially backed into a corner, which will make them more desperate and violent. These desperate actions are already evident in their current retreat in Iraq, where they are practicing a scorched-earth strategy. It has been estimated that about a million of Iraq’s prime, arable farm land has been rendered unusable by the retreating Islamic State, who seem to only want to make the population suffer more, as the farmland they are burning has little military value (Schwartzstein
A specific example of this destruction is in the Shemal sub-district of the Nineveh governorate, in northwestern Iraq. Here all 450,000 acres of Shemal’s arable land has sat fallow since the Islamic State’s five-month occupation ended in 2014 (Schwartzstein 2016). Additionally, every single one of Shemal’s 145 greenhouses was shattered and their generators and transformers stolen for other uses by the occupiers, but most damagingly of all was that every pump from the 485 artesian wells on which locals rely for irrigation was either deliberately destroyed or cannibalized for parts (Schwartzstein 2016). The water itself from the wells was contaminated too, as many farmers reported having their irrigation systems laced with diesel fuel, in order to make it toxic to drink and water crops. Lastly, the landmine problem has become increasingly larger as Islamic State fighters plant more and more improvised devices in fields and buildings, in order to slow down the advance of the coalition forces. These bombs have then made the land even more dangerous for future plantings, as no one is exactly sure how many bombs were made or where they were all placed. In a region that has been plagued by conflicts for many years now, this mindless destruction is almost incomprehensible. Fahad Hamad Omar, a Yazidi sheikh who was driven from his farm at the foot of Mount Sinjar, explains the bewilderment by saying:

“Living in this area, we’d seen chaos in the past. Never before, though, had people deliberately torched our fields. Never had they tried to completely wreck our livelihoods. Never have we encountered such animals” (Schwartzstein 2016).

The Islamic State’s actions are indeed animalistic and barbaric and sadly, they do not look to be changing tactics anytime soon.

In contrast to the barbarous actions of these extremists, it should be noted that the U.S. takes about the furthest opposite approach possible when attacking the Islamic State. An example of which was given by Colonel Steve Warren, the U.S. military spokesman in Baghdad, who told NPR that prior to a recent bombing run on Islamic State oil trucks, the pilots “flew over [the site] with F-15s and we dropped leaflets we had developed, written in Arabic, that essentially said, ‘Hey, run away, we’re about to strike your trucks’” (Nortam 2015). While difficult to gage the lasting effects that these small acts of
humanity have on the members of this inhumane group, one can hope that through acts like this, some of its members can realize that they are on the losing team and that the American’s are there to protect their best interests. Getting points like this across to the millions of civilians living under the control of the Islamic State and also to its members will help in the process of bettering the situation in both Iraq and Syria, following the cessation of their crises. In the end, the Islamic State’s day of judgement is coming and it is approaching ever quicker each day. Except, this is not a divine condemnation, it is a collective call by the rest of the world to stamp out the evil it represents and establish a more peaceful condition going forward.

As a culmination of this research paper, the following chapter will address possible solutions for both Iraq and Syria, following the cessation of their crises. It is the hope that a solution can be conceived that will both help end the current crises and bring peace to the region so more crises do not flare up and another nefarious organization does not rise up and destabilize the region. Through the assessment of spatial and chronologic characters, events, and ideologies that have led to the sectarian divide and other hampering burdens holding back Iraq and Syria, I believe that a partitioning of both countries, along the lines of religious, tribal, and cultural boundaries will help incubate a long era of peace in a currently violent region. This partitioning implication will be further discussed and broken down in the next chapter.
VI: Partitioning Implications

The Balkans defined the end of the 20th century by being first a source of anarchy and genocide, but then becoming an exemplification that peace can prevail if the proper steps are taken to ensure that a solution benefitting as many participating parties as possible is implemented. The region can now be used in the 21st century to provide a beacon of inspiration and hope that a similar outcome can be assembled out of familiar situations of anarchy, which in some cases are bordering on methodical genocide, in Syria and Iraq. In short, the former Balkan country of Yugoslavia contained multiple ethnic and religious groups, specifically Muslim Bosniaks, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats, that eventually all came to blows out of vehement hatred for one another and for hopes of territorial conquests as the encompassing Yugoslavian state dissolved (Clinton 2016). The war lasted four years and took the lives of 250,000 individuals, but eventually, with the help of international intervention, a peace treaty was signed in Dayton, Ohio on November 21, 1995 (Clinton 2016). Following the signed agreement, Yugoslavia was peacefully broken up into the six countries of: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia, and the Republic of Macedonia, as can be seen in Figure 6.1 (BBC 2006). Today, the events going on in Syria and Iraq mirror many of the occurrences in the 1990’s Balkan conflict. Like Yugoslavia, both Iraq and Syria are composed of multiple ethnic and religious groups that are each looking to situate themselves in the best position for their people. Both countries are also ripe with violence, as a result of these ethnic groups clashing for supremacy in anarchic lands where full control is a murky declaration. All of these unfortunate parallels in the style of violence that took place in both Yugoslavia and what is currently happening in Iraq and Syria make it likely that a paralleled solution for Yugoslavia and the Iraq and Syrian crises should emerge to help solve the paralleled problems between the two.
Figure 6.1 is a representation of what used to be the nation of Yugoslavia and is now the six nations of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia, and the Republic of Macedonia. Additionally, the 2006 map shows the autonomous nation, much like Kurdistan in Iraq, which was officially designated as such in 2008.
Source: (BBC 2006)

As various groups of differing ethnicities and religious affiliations gain and lose control of territory, ethnic violence and sectarian tensions get ratcheted up. The Islamic State is the chief force driving these odious sentiments as it mercilessly targets Shi’ites, Christians, and any other religious or ethnic group, even fellow Sunni Muslims, who do not adhere to its beliefs. Ramzy Mardini, an Iraq expert at the Atlantic Council, puts it this way: "The basic equation is this: ISIS provokes Shiites, Shiites overreact and generalize their response against Sunnis, and more Sunnis come to support ISIS. It's a vicious circle, with each cycle hardening the sectarian divide" (Lister CNN 2014). Therefore, he too believes that the possibility of negotiations to put Iraq back together again, have officially gone by the wayside. However, the Islamic State is not the only group carrying out ethnically discriminatory tactics.
In fact, the predominantly Shi’ite Iraqi army, which is being tasked as one of the main forces to help retake territory lost to the Islamic State in Iraq, has been accused of being just as deleterious of a ruler as the Islamic State. Specifically, Sheikh Ahmed Khalaf Hamid, one of the many displaced Sunni refugees from areas the Islamic State took over, stated that “the Iraqi army came to take their revenge on us because of our ethnicity” (MacDiarmid 2016). Hamid went on to accuse the supposedly liberating Iraqi army of “burning and looting homes, shooting livestock and firing indiscriminately at civilians”, all of which alienate the predominantly Sunni population in the region (MacDiarmid 2016). In addition to the Iraqi army, there are many Shi’ite militias included in the coalition force against the Islamic State and just like the Iraqi army; they too have been accused of being deleterious rulers. A brutal example is when an Iraqi militia posted on its Instagram account, a picture of a captured Islamic State fighter with the following caption:

“You can vote For (kill him or let him go) You have one houer to vote We will post his fate after one houer Tag your friends and take your right take your reveng from isis right now. Please we dont have the time just one houer so tag your friends” (Moore 2016).

The reported outcome was that the Islamic State fighter had been killed. While there is no question that these captured fighters should be punished, putting their death sentence up to a social media vote is questionable behavior. Therefore, if the supposed liberators also stoop to barbaric and unnecessary acts of violence, are they really liberators or are they just the opposite side of the same deadly and alienating coin? Syria is also experiencing similar fallbacks as the Islamic State is slowly defeated. This is because the hated Assad regime is the group making most of the significant gains against the Islamic State, like with its recent defeating of the Islamic State in the ancient town of Palmyra. By having Assad be the one to recapture land from the Islamic State, it hurts the Syrian revolutions initial, primary goal of driving him from power. In the end, these occurrences and accusations of brutality create tensions, which brings about the question of if these resentful groups are fit to govern a different and often times rival ethnic/religious/tribal group of people. One possibility is putting one of the multiple ethnic groups
in charge could lead to the alienation of other groups all over again. If this occurs, then the repressed groups’ anger could be channeled into something similar or maybe greater than today’s Islamic State, making the idea of a partitioning of each country a legitimate and viable, possible solution for peace.

By having the appointed liberators in each country turn out to be just as bad as the previous occupiers, does not advance either country towards a peaceful political solution that has the potential to be lasting. Because of this, I believe that instead of trying to keep each country intact and let similarly oppressive forces win out, that both Iraq and Syria should each be divided into three smaller countries; with many parallels to what happened with Yugoslavia. As radical of an idea of destroying a one hundred year old partition plan (Sykes-Picot) and replacing it with an updated partition-esque plan might be, it is an idea that has the support of many distinguished scholars heavily involved in both of the crises. Specifically, this list of advocates supporting some form of partitioning of Iraq and Syria includes prominent figures such as current Vice President and former ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Joe Biden, the University of Arkansas’s own, professor Najib Ghadbian, and it has also been mentioned, but not advocated, by current Secretary of State, John Kerry. Professor Ghadbian is a particularly notable advocate because he is currently the Special Representative for the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces to the U.S. and U.N. and is constantly working with the rebel forces. Therefore, this section is no longer a case study about a specific time period or component of Al Qaeda or the Islamic State. Instead, it will explore the positives and negatives of the possibility of partitioning both Iraq and Syria into three smaller, independently sovereign countries, based on the ethnic and religious breakdown of each country. Additionally, there is a secondary proposal to not breakup each country into three individual, sovereign countries, but to instead break up the two countries and combine their ethnic groups to form a total of four new, ethnically centralized countries, instead of the original plan for six. Overall, it is a proposal that is intended to sow the seeds
of peace in a garden that has consistently been filled with hateful and aggravating regimes and organizations.

Until the turn of the century, both Iraq and Syria had been ruled by authoritarian dictators that gave all of the power to one portion of the population and usually only one ethnic group, while ruling oppressively over the others. In Syria, the Assad regime, consisting of the current leader Bashar and prior to him his father, Hafez, have ruled Syria with an iron fist ever since Hafez successfully carried out a coup in the 1960s. Under their reign, the Alawites have benefitted enormously while the vast majority of Sunnis and Kurds were largely excluded. In Iraq, Saddam and his Ba’athist party were Sunni, so the Sunni minority received all of the privileges and ruled over the more numerous, but less powerful, Shi’ites in Iraq. Saddam was also particularly brutal on the Kurds and after his defeat in the Gulf War, the West implemented a no fly zone over the Kurdish region, in order to protect them from Saddam. Around this time, the Kurds in Iraq were also granted autonomy over their territory. Twenty-five years later, the Kurds continue to successfully self-rule this autonomous region in northern Iraq and have tried multiple times to become a fully independently sovereign state, but with no success. However, their success with autonomy is still noteworthy, because it is an encouraging sign that implementing the partition in the future could be successful, since they already have experience governing themselves. As part of their autonomy, they have also successfully created a formidable fighting force, the Peshmerga (“those who face death”), which has arguably provided the stiffest resistance to the Islamic State and has been vital in the operation to retake its territory (Ahmad 2016). As for the Sunni and Shi’ite Arabs, they (in reference to leaders that categorized themselves as one of the two) have also both had experience governing a country, albeit both ruled in divisive governments that would not be considered good governing models; the Sunnis ruled during Saddam’s regime and the Shi’ite’s under the former Maliki government. These discordant examples of government systems also prove that the two groups would likely be better off apart, because the divisions and scars between them are so deep that
they cannot work as one cohesive and inclusive government. For example, if separated, the Sunnis will be free from the possibility of being oppressed by vengeful Shi’ites, which will also make Sunnis less likely to join extremist groups whose main allure was often that they provided protection and employment when there were no other options. On the flip side, the Shi’ites, who are already closely influenced by Iran, will have the ability to become even closer to their caretaker, if given their own, independent, sovereign country. Lastly, the Kurds would finally get their coveted sovereign state that they have been spurred of getting ever since the Sykes-Picot Agreement skipped them over, about one hundred years ago. To help officially right this wrong, this new partitioning would have to be more ethnically and culturally sensitive with its partitioning lines, which is what makes drawing the new borders so difficult.

In Iraq, the beginning of the partitioning would start with the Kurdish state, because the Kurds’ autonomous governing area was drawn out twenty five years ago and has stayed intact ever since. This is then what the new sovereign Kurdish state would consist of, along with some of the contested land just south of it that contains Sunni Arab populations, which are contested by the Kurds as having been purposefully placed there by Saddam. To determine this, a more intrusive study would have to be completed on how long certain Sunni Arab populations have lived in certain areas versus the Kurdish populations there. This disputed territory can be seen in the burnt orange and orange/yellow striped section shown in Figure 6.2 (Zemer 2014). For fairness of economics, Mosul would fall into the Sunni Arab portion, which is represented by the burnt orange section and would be severely hampered economically be a lack of oil reserves in its region. Therefore the inclusion of what it is currently Iraq’s second largest city would hopefully help jumpstart the new, Sunni state’s economy, even though a deal to benefit from oil in one of the other newly established countries would be preferable to have too. The Kurdish state would then continue to contain Irbil and gain some of the striped portion on its southeastern border. For every grouping, the striped, contested parts are trickiest portions to partition
because in the majority of these parts, particularly Baghdad, there are many entrenched families from all ethnic backgrounds. Like with the Mosul example, the best case in trying to equally partition the land will be to make sure each new country has one of Iraq’s largest cities. Additionally, it is impossible to guarantee that each country will be strictly Sunni Arab, Shi’ite Arab, or Kurdish, so each country will have to be inclusive enough to include other ethnicities, as well as also open enough to let groups of these people leave on their own accord if they would like to immigrate to one of the other countries. To specifically draw it out, the Shi’ite Arab land would encompass the southeastern portion, neighboring Kuwait and Iran and including Baghdad, the Sunni Arab land would encompass the western portion, including Mosul and bordering Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

As was stated with the reality that it will be impossible to include all of each ethnic group into each of their newly designated nations, it is also a reality that everyone will not be happy economically either. This is because the Iraq’s oil is not evenly distributed throughout the country, meaning that each of the new countries would not receive equal economic benefits from it. However, within the partitioning deal that is struck, there could be a clause included that requires the country with more oil to ship it through the other, less oil rich nations, so they can benefit from the resources that once belonged to them too. The main downside to this is that once the countries are officially separated and boundaries are drawn, it will be harder to keep each country honest to respecting any deal that is made. With this being such a contentious topic, a plan voiced by current Vice President and former Senator of Delaware, Joe Biden, in 2006 could be another intriguing option. Instead of completely partitioning Iraq into three separate countries, Biden proposed that Iraq be divided into three autonomous regions, much like the current day situation of Kurdistan. This would then allow each group to govern themselves, but there would still be a central government structure to keep each group tied to the Iraqi narrative and each other. Specifically, he said that “the Kurdish, Sunni and Shi’ite regions would each be responsible for their own domestic laws, administration and internal security. [Whereas] the central
Figure 6.2 is a representation of the areas that are predominantly Sunni Arab, Shi’ite Arab, and Kurdish, along with where these groups mix. A partitioning of Iraq would likely be made along these visible separations. Source: (Zemer 2014)

government would control border defense, foreign affairs and oil revenues. Baghdad would become a federal zone, while densely populated areas of mixed populations would receive both multi-sectarian and international police protection” (Biden et al 2006). This is a formidable option that has potential, but I believe it has the significant downfall of having central government, where the three groups would have to work together to administer foreign policy and other international decisions. I believe that this would be too similar to the existing system to have a significantly positive effect on the peace in the region. Therefore, I believe that complete sovereignty and not just autonomy is the best option that would lead to long term peace.
Like was stated earlier, it would be impossible for the partitioning to completely please every group involved and that includes the groups outside of Iraq too. Particularly this includes the U.S. allies of Saudi Arabia and Turkey, who would be the two biggest sources of opposition for the partitioning. This is because the Saudis would no doubt be scared that an independent Shi’ite state would allow an open door for Iran to move their sphere of influence westward and ever closer to both Saudi Arabia and the Iranian backed militant group, Hezbollah. Turkey would be afraid as well, of the effect that a newly created Kurdistan would have on militant groups in its own country, many of which are Kurdish. Their main fear would then be about uprisings that might occur from their own Kurdish population, who also want to establish an independently sovereign Kurdistan. Despite this initial wariness, I believe that these extensions of doubt can be turned to extensions of support as it becomes apparent that the partitioning of Iraq makes that area and the countries surrounding it more peaceful. In my opinion, one of the main reasons that partitioning Iraq into multiple, sovereign states will work is because it will make it more difficult for each group to commit sectarian violence against one another. This is because if one group, now technically its own country, attacks another group, it will no longer be a domestic issue, but an international one that breaches sovereign and recognized borders. In all, by breaching the agreement of the sovereignty between the newly established states, the attacking state would be muddying a concept established over 350 years ago in the Peace of Westphalia. Granted it is only a different labeling of the conflict, by it now being international versus domestic, but by having the new countries align with other Middle Eastern countries for protection could mean this small dispute could now turn into something very large, very fast and I believe that is a strong deterrent.

Syria, like Iraq can be paralleled to the Balkan conflict of the 1990’s, just as Professor Najib Ghadbian states in his article last year, saying: “Bosnia [subset of the overall Yugoslavian conflict] saw horrific atrocities, unprecedented numbers of refugees and an exorbitant death toll. Terms like "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" became familiar, just as "barrel bombs" and "chlorine gas" are
becoming familiar today. In both Syria and Bosnia, we saw state and non-state actors unafraid of using violence against civilians. And we saw calculating elites eager to exploit ethnic and religious differences and foment religious extremism on all sides” (Sacirbey et al 2015). This exploitation of ethnic and religious differences by numerous extremist groups has spurred on the fragmentation of the country as the groups compete for power and control of the relatively lawless areas that the Assad regime does not have control over. As the conflict drags on, these groups will become more and more entrenched in these areas, which will make it harder for reunification to be possible as people become used to these divisions and further violence may increase animosity and sectarian divides between various groups of people. However, the longer that the conflict drags on, the more likely it is that Assad will remain in power in the end, because while Assad cannot seem to tip completely turn the tide against the rebellion, the rebels cannot do it to him either. This means that in a partitioning of Syria, Assad would be granted a rather miniscule and isolated stretch of land on the western coast of Syria. While keeping the integrity of the Assad regime intact would appear disastrous to many of the rebel groups, overall it would be a more suitable option to have this peace than to keep battling on fronts that do not see much change. A partitioning truce would also officially open up many areas to aid, that have been hard to reach because of the constant fighting and various strategic blockades. Assad though, would most likely want to keep fighting too, in order to try and regain the land he lost to various groups in the revolution. He would likely use his recent gains in Palmyra to try and justify his claims that his forces are strictly fighting terrorist groups, when in fact they are also indiscriminately bombing civilians and killing a reported average of 200 per week from those actions (Sacirbey 2015). Professor Ghadbian, then has a plan to help bring Assad to the negotiating table and it too draws parallels to the 1990’s Balkan conflict. When international forces intervened in the Balkans, one of the most effective strategies they used was in implementing a no fly zone over the conflict area, which helped curtail the amount of civilian deaths and leveled the playing field of the participating groups. He believes that the same strategy could be
effective in Syria because it would take away one of Assad’s deadliest weapons in keeping the rebel groups subdued. Additionally, he states that “a no-fly zone would also help dampen extremism by denying terrorist groups like ISIS a key recruiting tool: the West’s perceived indifference to their suffering” (Sacirbey 2015). Therefore, by the West getting involved it could have the dual positive effect of helping curtail the strength of both Assad and the extremist forces. Albeit, Assad’s ground forces would likely still be strong enough to hold off any rebel advancements, meaning that while civilian deaths would dramatically drop, the amount of territory Assad held likely would not. This means that in an ultimate political solution, a partition plan that would include an isolated Alawite state, ruled by Assad would still be likely.

As was stated earlier, the partitioning of Syria, would be very similar to the partitioning of Iraq, in that the current state would be broken into three smaller ones. The partitioning of Syria also recently received acknowledgement from U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, as a legitimate possibility. He was quoted in February telling the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “It may be too late to keep it as a whole Syria if we wait much longer [to end the conflict]” (Wintour 2016). While Secretary Kerry has not elaborated on what he envisions a partitioned Syria would look like, I believe that the partitioning would include the creation of individually sovereign states for the Sunni Arabs, the Kurds, and the Alawites, as can be seen in Figure 6.3 (Purcell 2016). The Alawites would control the smallest portion of territory, located on the eastern coast of Syria and bordering the northern tip of Lebanon. Most notably, it would contain the principal port city of Latakia, as well as the Russian port in Tartus. The Kurds would receive the northern and northwestern portions of Syria and would neighbor their Kurdish brethren in Iraq. Lastly, the Sunni Arabs would obtain the largest section of land, which would neighbor their brethren in Iraq. Most notably, their territory would include Syria’s two largest cities, Aleppo and Damascus. Just as in Iraq, to make the partition process economically viable for each of the new countries, there would have to be a strict and in depth agreement in place for the sharing of resources.
Figure 6.3 is a representation of what a possible partitioning of Syria would look like. Currently each of the shaded areas represents where the majority of each respected group resides and maintains control over.

Source: (Purcell 2016)

This is because certain areas are more resource rich than others, but then some, like the Alawite portion will have better economic prospects because of their proximity to ports or other trading infrastructure. Therefore, a plan that would specifically outline how either the resources or the monetary benefits of those resources would be distributed is vital to making sure that the partitioning is fair and that each area would be able to survive economically on their own.

Governing wise, the Alawites have the most experience and ability to govern a state, as they were the ones governing the original Syrian state. For the Syrian Kurds who have never experienced autonomy,
the hope is that they would just absorb themselves into the Iraqi Kurdish state, which does already know how to govern. The Sunni Arabs in Syria are a trickier problem, because they do not have the political expertise that the other two groups do and would encompass the largest section of space in Syria, as can be seen in Figure 6.3. This is most likely where the international community would come in to help prop up the new political system until they can govern on their own. Most likely this would come from either Jordan or Saudi Arabia as a deal to help ease its likely fears of continuing the Alawite government, which is supported by Iran. Additionally, the Russians be happy to see the Assad regime stay in power in some capacity, after it, until just recently, was inside Syria providing military support for it. However, there is another partitioning option to be explored, which might prove to be more suitable for the Syrian Sunni Arabs who lack the political experience. This partitioning plan, which is shown in Figure 6.4 would include the combining of the Iraqi and Syrian Sunni Arab states, as well as the Kurdish ones. Albeit, I would argue to keep the same partitioning plans of the Alawites and Kurds that Figure 6.3 suggested, I think the combining of the two Sunni Arab states could be more beneficial for both in the long run. For one, it could add more oil and gas fields to each country’s reserves, as well as extend pipelines that would not have to be negotiated for. It would also make the two countries stronger to combine their military forces, which would be preferable to fend off any future problems in the region. Culturally wise, it would make sense for the fact that there are many Sunni tribes that span the current day borders of Syria and Iraq, another lasting flaw of the ignorantly drawn Sykes-Picot borders. Lastly, it would be one less fragmentation of the Middle East, which would likely make the overall partition more appealing to the outside powers that are against dissolving the states in the name of longevity and continuity of the West’s influence on the region. In total, the plans will contain many moving parts and will have to be agreed on by the numerous parties throughout the region, because the agreement will most likely not survive without the backing of international and neighboring forces.
Figure 6.4 is a representation of what a combined partitioning of both Iraq and Syria might look like. While I personally agree with the combining of the Sunni Arab and Kurdish States, I believe that the extension of the Alawite State should be curtailed to the one shown in Figure 4.
Source: (Fisher et al 2014)

Partitioning Syria and Iraq as solutions to both of their current crises has many advocates, which have already been stated in the presentation of the plan, but there are also many who disagree that partitioning the countries is what will successfully bring about lasting peace. One such critic is Dr. Sherifa Zuhur, a Visiting Scholar at the University of California, Berkeley who has spent significant time studying Syria. In a recent lecture, titled "Syria, Revolution and the Islamic State", she responded to a question regarding the possibility of partitioning Syria, by saying that she does not believe that, that is what the majority of Syrians want. She said that Syrians originally began their revolution in 2011, not to secede, but to make the current system more open and inclusive. Additionally, she believes that
individual states formed out of the larger Syrian state would struggle economically and because of the overall lack of education in the last five years, these new countries would struggle to find viable leaders (Zuhur 2016). All of these are strong and relevant counters to the idea of partitioning, but I believe that even if the Syrian state remains whole, that will not get rid of the problem that future leaders will have a significant gap or complete lack of education. I do agree that keeping Syria whole has a better probability of succeeding again economically, but I believe that the overall destruction of infrastructure and the sectarian divides that have developed out of its prolonged conflict will still place a ceiling on the overall success that a unified Syrian state could have. Therefore, I still believe that partitioning the country into three sovereign states, while risky, has the highest potential of success as each group will be able to completely govern themselves and will have the protection of international recognition and sovereignty to curb the threat of future violence.

While some might agree that partition is an adequate path forward, they might in turn be opposed to having the U.S. and its Western allies be the ones to implement and protect the integrity of the partition. Their argument would likely be that intervening in Iraq on the terms of trying to create a friendly, stable state did not work out the first time, so why would it this time? I completely understand that hesitation, but I believe that only through the intervention of the hegemonic influence and power of the United States, in some capacity, will these crises be able to be solved. I do not necessarily believe that significantly more intervention, like for example the introduction of ground troops, is needed, but I do believe that America should, at the very least, begin to put pressure on our allies in the region to become more involved on the ground in our place. I believe that this would work out better, because Arab ground troops would likely be accepted with more open arms than Western troops would be. Additionally, by not having Western troops on the ground, extremist groups cannot use the idea of a ‘Western invasion’ to attract recruits. Ultimately, these are problems that are occurring in our Arab allies’ backyards and they should want to play a role in providing stability to the region. I also believe
that they could better implement a plan of stability too, because they understand the region, culturally, economically, and politically better than we do. As for the U.S.’s role I agree with what Professor Ghadbian argues in his essay; that the U.S. should expand its air operations to create an encompassing no fly zone over both Iraq and Syria, just like NATO did in the Balkans. This will then make it possible to attack Assad’s barrel bombing helicopters, which are one of the biggest civilian killers in Syria and with the current withdrawal of Russian forces in Syria, I believe this is something that we can successfully implement. By cutting off Assad’s ability to attack from the air will severely limit his overall military operations and will make it more likely that he will come to the negotiating table, especially if the survival of his government is on the table. Control of the skies will also give our allies more confidence and overall ability to defeat forces like the Islamic State and also Assad, if he were to try and expand his boundaries past the partition line. This no fly zone will also go a long ways in protecting the integrity of the newly established states until they are able to fend for themselves, which will no doubt be a long term project of its own. Despite this longevity, peace is the ultimate goal and no matter how long it takes, if it is successful, then the partitioning of Iraq and Syria was worth it.

After conducting comprehensive and intricate research, I believe that the partitioning of both Iraq and Syria into smaller, independently sovereign states is a viable solution that can and will succeed in ending the seemingly continual conflict in both countries, if the international community comes together to support it. I believe America must also become more involved in both crises and use its influential power to pressure regional allies into the conflict to conduct ground operations. The U.S. and its allies will then provide military support and funding for the partition, but not take on the primary role as the on the ground implementer. In all, a plan for peace must be created and one that is supported by the majority of the international community, or else it will likely fail. If this plan is not created soon, both Syria and Iraq will continue to be mired in anarchy and death, with the threat that this cataclysmic
force will spread to other parts of the region too. The people of Iraq and Syria deserve peace more than ever and if something is not done soon, there is no telling how high the eventual death toll may climb.
VII: Conclusion

Peace should be the fundamental goal of all human beings, but sadly, in many instances, conflict and suffering get in the way. In the Middle East, this is currently occurring, specifically in regards to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. In Syria, it was recently reported by the Syrian Center for Policy Research that the death toll has reached at least 470,000, since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, and also, the average life expectancy has dropped from 70 to 56 years (Barnard 2016). On the Iraqi side, the conflict has gone on significantly longer, with the current fighting having roots in the conflict that began with the U.S. invasion in 2003. It has been reported that between 2003 and 2014 that a total of 150,772 Iraqi civilians lost their lives due to fighting in their country (Iraq Body Count 2015). These are staggering and disheartening numbers that can be capped if the international community takes the initiative to do something about it. While this paper has focused mainly on the radicalized, Islamic terrorism aspect of these conflicts, understanding the role these terrorist groups have played will better help in the engendering of a solution in the future. This is because the rise of these groups has largely been because they have exploited the bouts of anarchy that these conflicts created, in order to build themselves a safe place to incubate and gain strength. Initially, Osama bin Laden saw this opportunity in Afghanistan, which is where he first began to build up Al Qaeda. Then, following 9/11, the U.S. removed Afghanistan as a safe haven for Al Qaeda and bin Laden began to branch his organization outward, to places like Iraq and Yemen (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula). Al Qaeda in Iraq, which had been founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi prior to formerly affiliating with the Al Qaeda core, was taken to Iraq by Zarqawi because he felt and assiduously told friends that “Iraq will be the forthcoming battle against the Americans” (Warrick 71). Zarqawi was right and once the destabilization of Iraq began, he took full advantage of it and quickly turned an initially small insurgency into a full blown sectarian war that teetered on deteriorating into a civil war, based on varying definitions of the conflict. Then, when
AQI was all but destroyed during the 2007 American troop surge, paired with the Anbar Awakening, AQI was able to hold on long enough to transfer itself over to Syria, soon after the civil war began there, following peaceful protests in 2011. Then, following the mismanaged governing style of Nouri al-Maliki, AQI, which was at this point in time known as ISI, returned to Iraq in 2013 and laid the foundations of what would be their main revival in the summer of 2014. Now, following almost two decades of island hopping from various environments that would harbor their terrorist activities, both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, in the form of Jabhat al Nusra (JAN), have firmly rooted themselves in the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts. While both groups are now in retreat, an agreed upon solution has not yet been made between all of the participating parties. It is critical that one is made, because without one the conflict could continue to linger on unabated and lead to the rise of another nefarious organization like or possibly worse than either Al Qaeda or the Islamic State.

Through an in depth assessment of the region’s players, history, resource management and differing ideologies, I believe that through the careful partitioning of the countries of Iraq and Syria, the international community can bring lasting stability to the region. As stated before, this would be an overturning of the century old Sykes-Picot Agreement, which has been at the root of many of the problems in the region ever since its inception. Now, the world has a chance to right its wrongs of drawing boundaries based on Western preferences and instead redraw boundaries that are more inclusive of the traditional cultural and religious boundaries that predate the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Each country would be divided among its three most populous ethnic/religious groups. In Iraq, that would consist of the Shi’ite Arabs, the Sunni Arabs, and the Iraqi Kurds. In Syria, that would consist of the Sunni Arabs, the Alawites, and the Syrian Kurds. As for the new boundaries, in Iraq they would roughly be that: the Shi’ite Arab region would encompass the southeastern portion, neighboring Kuwait and Iran and include Iraq’s current capital city of Baghdad, the Sunni Arab region would encompass the western portion, including the city of Mosul and bordering Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, and the
Kurdish portion would encompass the northern portions neighboring Syria, Turkey, and Iran, while still containing the current Kurdish capital of Erbil. In Syria, the new boundaries would roughly be that: the Alawites would gain control of a small, western sector neighboring the Mediterranean Sea and including the city of Latakia, the Sunni Arabs would gain the majority of the southern portion of Syria, up to just past the city of Aleppo, and then the Kurds would obtain the rest of the northern and northeastern section, bordering Turkey and Iraq. The success of this plan would hinge on the support of the international and most importantly Middle Eastern community, because it is their backyard and if something were to fall apart, the surrounding Middle East nations would be the first to feel the effects. As it stands, no viable solution has been offered up, because no one unconditionally knows what will be best for everyone involved in the conflict. However, one thing is unconditionally known and that is that the longer that both of these conflicts continue, the higher the innocent death toll will climb. Therefore, as an extension of humanity, the world should help rid the region of its often despotic occupiers and help formulate and support a lasting peace agreement that will decrease the chance of the development of a future crisis, of any magnitude.
VIII: Bibliography


2016. https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/4343-redefining-the-islamic-state/Fishman_Al-Qaeda_In_Iraq.023ac20877a64488b2b791cd7e313955.pdf


Figure A.1 represents the total troop levels in Iraq from 2003-2011 and shows the surge of both U.S. and international troops in 2006 and 2007 and then the decline of both beginning in 2008.
Source: (O’Hanlon 2011)
The following three photographs were taken by Washington Post reporter, Liz Sly, when she was able to walk through the town of Tal Abyad, soon after it was liberated from the Islamic State’s rule by a U.S. led coalition partnered with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units. Three other photos by Liz appeared in the preceding paper, but I felt that these needed to be seen too.

Figure A.2 exhibits a crude chopping block used by members of the Islamic State to behead anyone that defied its rule or committed crimes punishable by death. The chopping block was found inside of the town’s church, which had been converted into the local security center by the occupiers.

Source: (Engel 2015)
Figure A.3 exhibits the front façade of the local church in Tal Abyad, the Church of the Cross. It was turned into the local security center after the Islamic State took control of the town. Sadly, they turned this house of worship into a house of horrors, supposedly torturing prisoners inside of its walls. The Islamic State might have also beheaded prisoners inside of the church too, as the previously shown chopping block was found inside the church.

Source: (Engel 2015)
Figure A.4 exhibits the inside of the Church of the Cross in Tal Abyad, which was turned into the local security center after the Islamic State took control of the town. Sadly, the inside had been torched and vandalized at some point during their occupation and charring of the walls and ceiling can be seen in this picture.

Source: (Engel 2015)
Figure A.5 is a diagram depicting the messy and tangled relationships of all of the participants within the Syrian crisis. As can be seen even close allies, like America and Israel, have differing alignments with various groups, like with the U.S. being friendly with Turkey and Iraq, but Israel being neutral/mistrusting of these two countries.

Source: (The Economist Graphic Detail 2014)
Figure A.6 is a diagram showing how the Islamic State launders cash from outside sources into its territory. This is just one of numerous tactics that the Islamic State uses to finance its activities, some of the other prominent ways being the selling of oil and antiquities on the black market and also the gaining of funds through ransoms during kidnappings.

Source: (Coker 2016)
Figure A.7 is an excerpt from a report the Islamic State made on its ‘Aleppo Province’. It depicts the province’s size in kilometers, its population, and the amount of government and religious centers it had within the province.

Source: (Caris et al 2014)
The following pictures are from a report, published online by Conflict Armament Research (CAR), detailing some of the weapons seized by Kurdish forces after they fought Islamic State forces trying to take control of Kobane, Syria. The battle for Kobane lasted from September, 2014 to January, 2015 and the end result was the retreat of the attacking Islamic State forces. The weapons pictured here exemplify some of the sophisticated weapons systems that the Islamic State has gotten their hands on.

Figure A.8 is an excerpt from the CAR report shows a few of the advanced anti-tank weapons that were seized from Islamic State forces. These high explosive weapons pose a serious threat to coalition forces and lightly armored vehicles.

Source: (Conflict Armament Research 2015)
Figure A.9 shows pictures from the CAR report show some of the homemade rockets and launchers used by the Islamic State. While not as reliable as advanced weapons systems, they can still inflict significant damage if they successfully detonate.

Source: (Conflict Armament Research 2015)
Figure A.10 shows destroyed HMMWVs that had been captured and used by the Islamic State and are just a few examples of the rather advanced military equipment that they seized from American backed Iraqi forces. Compared to civilian pickup trucks with guns mounted in the bed, these HMMWVs were significant upgrades.

Source: (Conflict Armament Research 2015)