(Mis)Understanding the Islamic State

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The dramatic ascendance of the Islamic State — marked for many around the world by the group's capture of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, in June 2014 — has sparked a profusion of Western commentary simplistically blaming Islamic culture, ideology, and societies. Such diagnoses are usually linked with pronouncements about the need for Muslims to "reform" themselves to address the "Islamist extremist" threat to international peace and security. Commentary of this sort comes in relatively primitive, even jingoistic forms, as in neoconservative criticism of the Obama administration's refusal to include any reference to "Islam" in its February 2015 Summit on Countering Violent Extremism.[1] It also comes in more sophisticated forms, as in Graeme Wood's article, "What ISIS Really Wants," published in March 2015 by *The Atlantic*, which in less than a month became the most read article in the magazine's 158-year history.[2]

Yet, the proposition that the Islamic State's rise reflects, first and foremost, something pathological about Islam has no factual basis. If the United States and other governments base policy on it, they will only do further damage to their own long-term interests in the Middle East while pointlessly adding to the destruction that outside

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powers have already inflicted on the region.

Clearly, the Islamic State defines itself in deeply religious terms, forging its agenda from substantively informed — even if contested — interpretations of the *Qur'ān*, Islamic history, and *sharī'a* (Islamic law). These interpretations are grounded in conceptual frames and modes of discourse well-established in *salafi* forms of Sunni Islam. In terms of how the Islamic State explains its actions and appeals for support, commentators like Wood are correct: the movement cannot be understood apart from religion.

But religion is only part — and not the most causally significant part — of the Islamic State's story. Historically, Sunni *salafi* activists have not been violent or even assertively *jihādi* on the world stage for almost all of the several centuries in which they have been identifiable actors in the Muslim world. Those that are now violently *jihādi* assumed this posture only recently, and only in response to a particular set of political circumstances.

This is the critically important analytical question: What changed for Sunni *salafi* Muslims, perhaps for Sunnis more generally, that impelled them to go from a relatively nonviolent posture to violent militancy? The key starting point for answering this question is that the Islamic State needs to be understood as a manifestation of many Muslims' reaction, since the Cold War's end and especially since 9/11, to multiple U.S. military interventions in the Middle East, including heavily militarized and brutal occupations of Middle Eastern countries. It also needs to be understood as a manifestation of many Muslims' reaction to what they see as illegitimate local governments that help the United States and other Western powers exploit the Muslim world in return for Western protection — primarily against their own populations. This is the essential context for the Islamic State's emergence; in that context, the Islamic State is a *reactive* and *predictable* product of political grievance — not of religion.

Broadly speaking, the Islamic State's anti-occupation agenda

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is shared by *al-Qa'ida* and its affiliates. The Islamic State's program grows out of the same theological roots as *al-Qa'ida*'s — and reflects the same desperate anger at massive U.S. military deployments and coercive interventions in the Middle East since the 1990s, when *al-Qa'ida* got its start. Organizationally, too, the Islamic State is an offshoot of *al-Qa'ida*: the movement now known as the Islamic State originated shortly after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, under the banner of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, to fight occupation.

But, by any standard, the Islamic State has now overtaken *al-Qa'ida* as the most formidable Sunni movement fighting what it describes as the occupation of Muslim lands by illegitimate governments allied to Western powers intent on subjugating the Muslim world. The Islamic State has managed to eclipse its forebear by differentiating its agenda in important ways from *al-Qa'ida*'s — especially politically, through the Islamic State's claim to constitute a religiously legitimate caliphate. The claim makes the Islamic State more than just another Sunni *jihādi* movement reacting against the occupation of Muslim lands by unrepresentative governments serving Western powers; it has defined a new political horizon for Sunni Muslims.

This difference helps to account for the Islamic State's ascendancy over *al-Qa'ida* — in prominence, attractiveness, and on-the-ground impact. The Islamic State has drawn tens of thousands of fighters and other activists (perhaps more than 100,000) from over eighty countries — not only from Muslim-majority societies but also from minority and diaspora Muslim communities in North America, Europe, and Asia.[3] Today, the Islamic State controls territories in Iraq and Syria larger, in the aggregate, than Britain, with over six million inhabitants. A growing number of Sunni *jihādi* groups across the Muslim world are declaring their allegiance to it, in some cases (i.e., in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen) claiming to have set up "provinces" (*wilāyāt*) of the Islamic State.[4] Afghan officials say that the Islamic State is establishing ever more cells across Afghanistan, including in border areas with China and Pakistan. The movement has a sophisticated and, apparently, effective social media strategy; analyses of social media and other indicators suggest that it attracts interest and varying but significant

measures of positive regard across the Sunni world.[5]

While the Islamic State's self-constructed identity is key to its emergence from *al-Qa'ida*'s shadow, identity alone does not explain why the Islamic State has risen so dramatically. To understand this, one must appreciate the extraordinary degree to which America's Middle East policy has not just motivated, but *enabled* the Islamic State's ascendance. Beyond its analytic importance, such appreciation underscores that, to deal more effectively with the Islamic State, the United States needs to recast its strategic approach to the whole region. Finally, to understand the Islamic State, one must appreciate the crucial role played by regional states, most notably the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in encouraging, enabling, and facilitating the violent programs of Sunni *jihādi* militants across the Middle East.

Salafism and the Islamic State's Mission

Both *al-Qa'ida* and the Islamic State are rooted in a severe version of Sunni, *salafi* Islam, historically associated with Muhammad ibn 'abd al-Wahhāb, an 18th century preacher, legal scholar, and religious revivalist from the Najd, in the center of the Arabian peninsula. The Arabic word *salaf* means "predecessors"; in a religious context, it refers to *as-salaf as-sālih* (the "pious predecessors") — that is, to the Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations of Muslims. In the same context, the adjective *salafi* denotes Sunni Muslims who take the pious predecessors as a model for how Muslims should live their lives and organize their societies.[6]

While the term *salafi* has been part of Islamic theological and legal discourse since the 9th century AD, it gained political salience in the Sunni world through Wahhāb, who formed an alliance with *as-Saud*, a dynastically ambitious Najdi family.[7] Observing an Islamic world he believed to have become weak because its religion had been corrupted, Wahhāb — in keeping with basic *salafi* tenets — aimed to return his fellow Muslims to the pristine Islam of the *salaf*. This meant purging Muslim observance of any trace of what he deemed *shirk* (polytheistic idolatry), such as veneration of past

Muslim leaders and luminaries (including members of the Prophet's own family). Self-professed Muslims who did these things — not only Shi'a Muslims but many Sunnis, too — were, in Wahhāb's view, not just sinners; they were subject to *takfīr* — being declared infidels no longer part of the *umma*. More generally, Wahhāb rejected "innovation" (*bid'a*) in theology, law, or worship.[8]

Wahhāb's thinking about politics unfolded against the classical paradigm of the Sunni caliphate (*khilāfa*, or succession) — the passing of legitimate leadership over the *umma*, or Muslim community, from the Prophet Muhammad to a caliph (*khalīfa*), or divinely mandated successor, in each generation. From early practice, codified in legal and political theorizing during the 11th-13th centuries, the preponderant Sunni view held that a caliph should be a pious and mentally capable Muslim man descended from the Quraysh (the Prophet Muhammad's tribe) who exercises political authority over — and enforces Islamic law in — some expanse of territory. Once a caliph emerges who meets these criteria, Muslims throughout the *umma* owe him *bay'a* ("allegiance"); to withhold *bay'a* from a caliph or otherwise to work against him is *fitna* — the seditious sowing of division within the *umma*.

By Wahhāb's time, a true caliphate had, by these standards, arguably not existed for at least two centuries. From 1517, the caliphate had become effectively coterminous with the Ottoman Empire, based in Istanbul, with Ottoman sultans simultaneously claiming status as caliphs. But, in the wider Sunni world, most *salafi* scholars, including Wahhāb in the 18th century, did not recognize the Ottoman caliphate's legitimacy.[9] (The Ottomans were not Qurayshi and arguably did not enforce all aspects of Islamic law. In their defense, the Ottomans cited classical scholars who put aside the requirement that a caliph be Qurayshi, but this was a minority view.)

From the time prior to Wahhāb until the present day, *salafi*s have responded in different ways to the absence of a legitimate caliphate. Some, often described as "quietist" or "purist," have eschewed most forms of political engagement, either because they see such engagement in itself as *fitna* or because they prioritize reforming how Muslims understand and practice their faith as an essential

antecedent to establishing a religiously legitimate state. Others have seen challenging rulers' religiously questionable policies or, more radically, challenging the legitimacy of rulers who do not govern by *sharī'a* as religiously imperative — perhaps even part of the binding obligation of *jihād*.[10]

Wahhāb's own political reflection and engagement were relatively activist in orientation, but also encompassed aspects of more quietist approaches. In the mid-18th century, he formed a partnership with *as-Saud*. Under its terms, the Saudis committed to faithfully administering *sharī'a* and promoting true Islam (as defined by Wahhāb) in areas under their control. In return, Wahhāb provided religious justification for a Saudi campaign to displace Ottoman authority on the Arabian peninsula; as the Saudis expanded their control over the peninsula, Wahhāb certified the religious legitimacy of their rule. Since then, this kind of "Wahhabi" argumentation has been deployed to legitimate the Saudis' reign over as much of Arabia as possible.[11] To be sure, Saudi rulers have never put themselves forward as caliphs. (Among other factors, they are not Qurayshi.) Nevertheless, in the absence of a true caliphate, the Saudis' *salafi* backers have defended their project as the modern world's only truly Islamic state, with the *Qur'ān* as its constitution; opposing such a state would, Saudi advocates hold, be a form of *fitna*.

Since the founding of the current Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (historically, the third Saudi state) in 1932, the Saudis have promoted a "Wahhabi" version of *salafi* Islam not only inside their country but around the Muslim world. They have done so as a way of managing domestic dissent and as a foreign policy tool.[12] These efforts have, to a considerable degree, marginalized potentially more creative modes of *salafi* thinking.

Today, leaving quietism aside, the main alternatives to Wahhabism on political matters are even "harder line" *salafi* currents — including those grounding *al-Qa'ida* and the Islamic State. These currents have taken arguments like those Wahhāb used against the Ottomans, adapted them to contemporary circumstances, and reinforced them with critiques of Saudi Arabia's internal politics and foreign policy to construct a simultaneously legal, theological, and

political case for rejecting the Saudi state's religious legitimacy.[13] From these premises, *al-Qa'ida* and the Islamic State have both pronounced *takfīr* against the Saudi monarchy, even though both movements received substantial Saudi support in their formative stages (and almost certainly continue to receive support from inside the Kingdom). These groups now focus on restoring a legitimate caliphate as their ultimate goal.

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ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI AND THE ISLAMIC STATE'S IDENTITY

Osama bin Laden's career well illustrates this ideological and programmatic trajectory. A son of one of the wealthiest and most politically connected families in Saudi Arabia, bin Laden was strongly influenced as a young man by ideas and arguments propounded by radical *salafi* thinkers who gained prominence in the Kingdom and elsewhere in the Sunni world during the 1970s and 1980s. He initially embraced *jihād* as part of Saudi Arabia's campaign, in partnership with the United States, to arm, fund, and train Sunni fighters to resist the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan from 1979. Notwithstanding his family's close and public alignment with *as-Saud*, bin Laden was appalled when the Saudis agreed to the deployment of nearly 700,000 U.S. military personnel to the Kingdom in response to Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. He broke with the Saudis when they let tens of thousands of these troops remain in the Arabian peninsula even after Iraqi troops had been expelled from Kuwait.

Over the next several years, bin Laden laid out his case against the Saudi monarchy: by failing to defend the Kingdom, by cooperating with *kuffār* (infidels), even against other Muslims, and by abandoning the religious duties of rulers, the Saudis had abdicated their religious legitimacy to govern; Muslims had a duty to overthrow them. Once bin Laden turned on his erstwhile patrons and created *al-Qa'ida*, he and his followers thought of their ongoing *jihād* against American occupiers of Muslim lands and

their apostate local collaborators as helping to create conditions for eventually restoring the caliphate.[14] They did not, however, expect this to occur in their lifetimes. Leading an essentially underground, non-territorial operation, bin Laden — who, like the Saudis, was not Qurayshi — never put himself forward, even putatively, as caliph.

While the Islamic State has followed the same basic trajectory, it has assumed a different stance on the critical question of restoring the caliphate. The Islamic State, as noted, was born out of *al-Qa'ida*. More precisely, the movement now known as the Islamic State originated shortly after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq as *al-Qa'ida* in Iraq, led by the Jordanian Abu Musabaz-Zarqawi — a veteran of the same Afghan *jihād* that had spawned bin Laden and an informal student of the influential Jordanian *salafi* cleric and scholar Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. It was Zarqawi who, among other things, introduced his nascent movement to the tactic of taking hostages and, in response to specific provocations by its adversaries, executing them — including by beheading.[15] Following Zarqawi's death at the hands of U.S. forces in 2006, *al-Qa'ida* in Iraq morphed into the Islamic State of Iraq, but remained part of the broader *al-Qa'ida* "family." This began to change, though, with the rise of the Islamic State's current leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Baghdadi was born Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri as-Sammarai in 1971, in Samarra, Iraq. He studied Islamic theology, history, and poetry at the Islamic University of Baghdad, ultimately obtaining a doctorate in *sharī'a*. He was active as a Sunni preacher in Baghdad and in Iraq's Diyala province while Saddam Hussein was still in power. After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, Baghdadi got involved in the anti-U.S. Sunni insurgency; he spent 2005-2009 as a prisoner of the U.S. military. Baghdadi became leader of *Al-Qa'ida* in Iraq — which, as noted, would later become the Islamic State — in 2010.[16] When conflict broke out in Syria in 2011, the Islamic Republic of Iraq — at that point, still linked to *al-Qa'ida* — helped to form another *al-Qa'ida* affiliate, *Jabhat an-Nusra*, to fight against the Assad government. After Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. special forces in 2011, Baghdadi and his associates still did not publicly challenge the authority of *al-Qa'ida*'s "core"

leadership under bin Laden's successor, Ayman az-Zawahiri.

In 2013, though, the Islamic State of Iraq changed its name to (depending on the translation) the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). At the same time, Baghdadi asserted his continuing control over *Jabhat an-Nusra* and, more strikingly, declared his supremacy over *al-Qa'ida*. This prompted a still ongoing rift between Baghdadi's movement, on one side, and *Jabhat an-Nusra* and *al-Qa'ida*, on the other. After ISIS/ISIL captured Mosul in June 2014, it changed its name once again, to the Islamic State, setting the stage for Baghdadi — who is Qurayshi — to proclaim himself caliph the following month.

The Islamic State' adherents see Baghdadi — who publicly asserted his status as caliph in a sermon at the Great Mosque in Mosul on July 5, 2014 — as the first true caliph in centuries.[17] To justify Baghdadi's claim, the Islamic State now emphasizes the territorial and administrative aspects of its agenda. Territories under the Islamic State's control — not just in Iraq and Syria but also in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen — are organized into provinces (the aforementioned *wilāyat* structure). Each province is headed by a *wali*, or "governor"; provinces are divided into districts, each of which is overseen by an *amīr*, or "prince." Some *amīr*s are of local origin, while others are dispatched by the Islamic State's central leadership; *amīr*s of local origin are typically assigned deputies from the central leadership.

Administratively, the Islamic State's caliph is supported by a *shura* (consultation) council, through which the movement's senior figures advise him on matters of state. A *sharī'a* council evaluates executive decisions and actions for consistency with Islamic law. The Islamic State's bureaucratic apparatus is organized into civil and military/security wings, supported by councils — ministries, in effect — for finance and media. The civil wing, embodied in a provincial council, is responsible for the domestic functions of a modern state — from operating courts, hospitals, power grids, and schools to issuing parking tickets and registering property transactions — at the caliphate, province, and district levels. Western media report with some regularity on what their correspondents typically describe as difficulties in the Islamic State's

provision of various public services, highlighting such deficiencies as undermining the movement's claim to be a caliphate.[18] However, there is no evidence to date of local populations in areas under the Islamic State's control turning definitively against it.

The movement's military/security wing — embodied in a military council and a security and intelligence council — has proven carefully opportunistic at choosing its targets and the optimum time at which to attack them. The Islamic State's use of violence — especially against hostages, as recorded and posted on the Internet — has elicited horrified reactions around the world. But even in this regard the movement displays a calculated tactical logic. After the Islamic State began taking American journalists hostage in early 2013, it did not execute any until after U.S. forces started attacking it in August 2014. That month, as one of its fighters (the notorious "jihadi John") beheaded James Foley, for what turned out to be a worldwide video audience, the Islamic State warned that, if U.S. military forces continued bombing, it would execute another hostage, Steven Sotloff. Airstrikes continued; in early September 2014 — as promised — the group beheaded Sotloff, for another global audience. Similarly, in January 2015, the Islamic State demanded $200 million from Japan for the release of Kenji Goto, a Japanese journalist it was holding hostage. The amount was exactly equal to what Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had pledged, earlier that month, to support the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition. After Tokyo declined to pay, Goto was beheaded.

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U.S. POLICY AND THE ISLAMIC STATE'S RISE

To attract political support as they mount campaigns against what they portray as foreign occupiers and illegitimate local governments effectively imposed by those occupiers, movements like *al-Qa'ida* and the Islamic State must target actors that large segments

of local populations are willing to see in precisely these terms. In recent decades, the rise of militant *salafi* jihadism in general and of the Islamic State in particular has been deeply and extensively conditioned by core aspects of America's Middle East policy.

Certainly, Washington's recurrent partnership with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab monarchies to arm, fund, and train Sunni militants across the region has been an indispensable backdrop to the rise of *salafi* militancy in general and of the Islamic State in particular. This aspect of U.S. policy dates back to President Jimmy Carter's July 1979 directive — signed before the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan — to support violent Sunni *jihādi*s there, later known as *mujāhidīn*, to goad Moscow into the same kind of prolonged and strategically draining occupation that had bogged America down in Vietnam. In the 1990s — after Soviet forces had finally withdrawn from Afghanistan in 1989 — some of the *mujāhidīn* morphed into *al-Qa'ida*, under bin Laden, and into the Afghan Taliban; over time, as noted, *al-Qa'ida* served as the Islamic State's breeding ground.

This transformation — from *mujāhidīn* to *al-Qa'ida* to the Islamic State — was driven by three other aspects of America's Middle East strategy. The first was the deployment of hundreds of thousands of military personnel to the Arabian peninsula following the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the retention of a significant portion of these forces on the ground after Iraqi forces were driven from Kuwait in 1991. As noted, deployment of a U.S.-led military coalition to Saudi Arabia turned bin Laden against the Saudi monarchy. The open-ended retention of U.S. forces on the ground in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states after the first Persian Gulf War — something America had not done, to any appreciable extent, during the Cold War — also marked the beginning of widespread perceptions in the Muslim world that the United States had become an occupying power. These perceptions fed the organizational growth of *al-Qa'ida* during the 1990s, ultimately prompting the 9/11 attacks.[19]

In turn, 9/11 opened the door for America's self-declared "global war on terror," which has badly undermined the perceived legitimacy of U.S. purposes in the Middle East and boosted popular

receptivity in the Muslim world to narratives and agendas focused on resisting U.S. aggression, occupation, and political manipulation. In this context, the second element of U.S. policy that has directly contributed to the Islamic State's rise is the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.

Ostensibly part of America's post-9/11 war on terror, the invasion destroyed the Iraqi state and enabled the political displacement of formerly dominant Iraqi Sunnis by decisively larger Shi'a and Kurdish communities constituting the overwhelming majority of Iraqis. In short order, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni allies of the United States began helping segments of Saddam Hussein's disbanded army and Iraqi Sunni tribal elements prepare to press their demands — basically, to retain a disproportionate share of political power in post-Saddam Iraq — through violence. They reinforced these indigenous Iraqi forces with foreign veterans of (Saudi-sponsored) *jihādi* campaigns in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and elsewhere — many of whom associated with (the Jordanian) Zarqawi's nascent Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, the organizational forerunner of the Islamic State. By summer 2003, this coalition of former Iraqi soldiers, Sunni tribal fighters, and Saudi-sponsored foreign *jihādi*s launched what quickly ballooned into a full-blown insurgency against U.S.-led occupation forces and emerging post-Saddam political structures.

Washington then exacerbated the problem by arming and training over 85,000 of what U.S. officials called "moderate" Iraqi Sunni "tribesmen" in the 2007-2008 "surge." The surge temporarily paid off enough Sunni fighters to let U.S. commanders and politicians claim that their "strategy" was reducing levels of violence — and U.S. casualties — in Iraq.[20] But it also gave Iraqi Sunnis and their non-Iraqi Sunni allies greater wherewithal with which — once U.S. forces were out of Iraq — to attack what were bound to be Iraqi central governments dominated by Shi'a Islamist and Kurdish parties. A growing number of U.S. military officers involved in the surge — including generals — now admit that many of the Sunni fighters trained by U.S. forces in Iraq have since joined forces with the Islamic State.[21]

A third aspect of U.S. policy contributing to the Islamic State's

ascendance was the Obama administration's decision, in spring 2011, to support largely Sunni militias willing to collaborate with Washington in trying to overthrow incumbent governments in Libya and Syria. These campaigns have had disastrously counter-productive consequences in both countries. They also attracted ever larger waves of radicalized foreign fighters — including, in Syria, thousands of veterans of the Iraqi insurgency — allowing them to hone their skills for future battles. U.S., Gulf Arab, and Turkish support substantially boosted these fighters' access to arms, equipment, and money. Beyond this material boost, the U.S.-backed campaign to oust Syria's Assad government gave the Islamic State of Iraq — since 2010, under Baghdadi's command — the political and territorial space in which to become the Islamic State.[22]

Understanding how much U.S. policy has contributed to the Islamic State's rise should spark sharp questions about how current U.S. strategy may end up making the Islamic State *even stronger*, not weaker. It should also underscore the risks that countries which become too closely associated with this strategy will, in the process, make themselves more attractive targets for *jihādi* violence.

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capabilities in the near term, the development of Iraqi military capabilities to fight the Islamic State on the ground in the medium term, and professed long-term aspirations to cultivate a more Sunni-inclusive political order in Iraq and a potent but "moderate" anti-Assad opposition in Syria. One may argue that U.S.-led coalition airstrikes have helped contain the Islamic State's military reach. Some analysts also assert that external military pressure is weakening the internal cohesion of the Islamic State's forces and political apparatus.[23] Nevertheless, the Islamic State retains control over the vast majority of the territory it held in the summer of 2014, when the U.S.-led air campaign began. While the Pentagon claims that 6,000 Islamic State fighters have been killed in this air campaign, engaging in battle with the United States has reinforced the Islamic State's appeal throughout the Muslim world, as evidenced by the tens of thousands of new fighters that have swelled the movement's ranks.[24]

Similarly, U.S.-led development of Iraqi capabilities to fight and, ultimately, to retake territory from the Islamic State is moving slowly. Indeed, Iran has proven to be more effective at this task than the United States. To be sure, recapturing territory from the Islamic State could potentially weaken its attractiveness by undermining the credibility of its claim to be a new caliphate. But any initiative to this end could also backfire in terms of Islamic State recruitment — like the U.S.-led air campaign seems already to have backfired — if America is seen as leading an anti-Muslim military campaign in its anti-Islamic State ground operations.

As for the longer-term, more "political" aspects of the U.S. approach, they remain almost completely notional — primarily because they are irretrievably at odds with on-the-ground conditions in Iraq and Syria. Post-Saddam Iraq's demographic and political realities set serious limits on how far any Iraqi prime minister can go in courting Sunni cooperation with the central government and wooing Iraqi Sunnis away from the Islamic State. Nouri al-Maliki's replacement as prime minister in 2014 by Haider al-Abadi has not meaningfully altered these parameters. In Syria, not only is the government in an increasingly strong position; non-*jihādi* elements — the so-called "moderate opposition" — have

become virtually irrelevant to the battle between the government and anti-Assad oppositionists, now effectively a battle between the government and two *jihādi* movements, *Jabhat an-Nusra* and the Islamic State.

All this suggests that, until America begins to pursue a genuinely regional strategy against the Islamic State — including engaging Syria's Assad government and Iran as important partners — U.S. policy will end up helping to sustain the Islamic State, not to undermine it. But pursuing such a strategy will require the United States to revise its overall approach to the Middle East, fundamentally and comprehensively. More specifically, Washington will need to abandon its longstanding but failed quest to dominate the region and seek instead, through serious diplomatic engagement with all important regional players, to nurture a reasonably stable balance of power, in which major regional states check one another's reckless impulses.[25] Unfortunately, there is little evidence that Washington is decisively shifting America's Middle East policy in this direction.

The Islamic State and the Need for Regional Equilibrium

Strategically, the Islamic State's rise must finally be evaluated as both a reflection of and a significant factor in the Middle East's shifting regional dynamics. In this regard, the Islamic State's ascendance brings into stark relief an unfolding political crisis in the Sunni Muslim world, especially the Sunni Arab world.

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Polling data and electoral outcomes whenever Middle Eastern populations get to vote in a reasonably open way show that a strong majority of Middle Eastern Muslims want to define their political futures in terms of participatory Islamism and governments committed to foreign policy independence. Yet, the only successfully operating participatory Islamist order — an order

combining participatory politics and elections with principles and institutions of Islamic governance — is the Islamic Republic of Iran, defined in explicitly Shi'a terms for an overwhelmingly Shi'a population. Sunni Muslims have, at least so far, failed to stand up anything close to a comparable model of participatory Islamism.

Historically, the Sunni movement that has offered the most promising platform for such a model has been the Muslim Brotherhood, based in Egypt with affiliates in other countries. But, in the context of the Arab Awakening, the Muslim Brotherhood's collapse-*cum*-suppression, epitomized in the failure/overthrow of Egypt's elected Brotherhood government in July 2013, has undercut the Brotherhood "model" as a guide for Sunni Islamist politics. That, in turn, has left the field to politically engaged *salafi*s — either in their Saudi/Wahhabi variant or in a *jihādi*, *al-Qa'ida*/Islamic State form. Even if the Islamic State proves to be less durable than the preceding analysis suggests, its proclamation of a caliphate will remain the Sunni world's most compelling political program until a viable Sunni model of participatory Islamist politics emerges.

This points to yet another aspect of U.S. policy that has conditioned the Islamic State's ascendance: the Obama administration's refusal to engage, robustly and supportively, with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood after the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 and its concomitant acquiescence to the Saudi- and Emirati-facilitated coup that overthrew Egypt's elected Brotherhood government two and a half years later.[26] If the 2013 Egyptian coup had not occurred, the Islamic State would almost certainly not have exploded onto the regional scene so dramatically the following year.

Just as importantly, these developments highlight the crucial impact of Saudi Arabia's regional policies and, especially, its response to the Arab Awakening in creating conditions conducive to the Islamic State's rise. Since early 2011, Riyadh has, with cooperation from some other Sunni states, led a "counter-revolution" aimed at quashing the emergence of participatory Islamist polities in Sunni Arab societies.[27] This counter-revolution operates through several channels. Encouraging, facilitating, and funding the Egyptian coup was one. Another is overt military intervention. The world

witnessed this when Saudi troops entered Bahrain in 2011 to help suppressprotests by a Shi'a-majority population unhappy with rule by the Sunni Khalifa monarchy. The world witnessed it again when a Saudi-led coalition of Sunni states launched a military campaign in Yemen in 2015 — ostensibly against Houthi rebels, but really to block more representative political structures there.

Arguably the most dangerous channel for the Saudi counter-revolution has been Riyadh's continuing — in some ways, intensified — backing for violent *jihādi*s. Saudi Arabia has done all this with political, intelligence, and logistical support — including accelerated U.S. arms sales — from the Obama administration. While the Kingdom has purportedly joined the U.S.-led coalition fighting the Islamic State, it has hardly dropped its ties to Sunni militias. In March 2015, as the United States and the rest of the P5+1 worked with Iran to produce a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to guide negotiations on a nuclear agreement, Saudi Arabia instigated the capture of Idlib, in Syria, by *Jabhat an-Nusra*; in April 2015, Saudi-led military action in Yemen enabled Al-Qa'ida to make significant territorial gains there.[28] Until America recalibrates its alliance with Saudi Arabia, the Islamic State — or something like it — will be a potent and potentially disruptive force in the Middle East.

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