

# **ISIS**

**The Spawn of War**

The Middle East was the site of the earliest civilizations, and shortly after those civilizations, the first empires. And with empires come conflicts. The Middle East has been a center of conflict since the beginning of recorded history. It has always been one empire or another occupying, pillaging, and warring over this crucial swath of desert. This time, the United States is one of the empires occupying, pillaging, and warring. It is ironic that the United State's main enemy in the region is a beast that it itself created: ISIS. The United State's interference in the Middle East's affairs, beginning in 1991 and still continuing today, has contributed greatly to the creation and strengthening of ISIS and its predecessors.

To truly understand the origins of the current conflict in the Middle East, one has to look back over a century, to World War I. In March of 1915, representatives from Russia, Great Britain, and France met to divvy up the spoils of war. Correctly assuming the total destruction of the Ottoman Empire, Russia claimed the Strait of Dardanelles, Istanbul, and the majority of Turkey, while France and Britain were left to split up what is now Syria, Iraq, northern Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel, which, not coincidentally, are all now hotbeds of terrorist activity and instability. A little over a year later, Mark Sykes and Francois Georges Picot, representatives from the British and French governments, had a secret meeting to draw many of the borders in the Middle East that still exist today.<sup>1</sup> Because of their two countries' great demands for oil, they put everything not given to Russia under protection or direct rule of either France or Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> This move betrayed their Middle Eastern allies, who had fought against the Ottoman Empire in the hopes of creating sovereign Arab nations. Instead, much of what is now Syria and Iraq was split into French and British protectorates, with many small and virtually

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<sup>1</sup> "Britain and France conclude Sykes-Picot agreement," History.com, accessed January 13, 2017, [www.history.com/this-day-in-history/britain-and-france-conclude-sykes-picot-agreement](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/britain-and-france-conclude-sykes-picot-agreement).

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix I

powerless Arab states in a no-man's land that the West could use to drill for oil. Many people in that area resented, and still resent, this land grab. Borders were drawn without any thought to tribal conflicts, causing uncomfortable and eventually violent groupings between the main tribes of the region, the Kurds and the Sunni and Shia Muslims.<sup>3</sup> These three groups have never mixed well, and when France, Great Britain, and Russia finally retreated from the region, they left unstable, undemocratic, and even genocidal governments like Saddam Hussein's. In its death throes, Imperialism had created conflicts that are coming back to bite the West even today.

There have been three Gulf Wars in our long, convoluted history in the Middle East. The first Gulf War started with the Iraqi invasion of its oil-rich neighbor, Kuwait, during President George Bush Senior's administration. After a 100 hour operation in 1991 known as Desert Storm, which was organized by NATO and some of its Middle Eastern allies, Saddam Hussein's military was expelled from Kuwait. Despite the many human rights violations against Shia Muslims committed by the Sunni Hussein government, Bush Sr. decided to end at getting Iraq out of Kuwait, and not taking Hussein out of power. A little over ten years later, Bush's son, George W. Bush, decided to finish what his father had started by beginning the second Gulf War.<sup>4</sup>

Just weeks after the tragic events of 9/11, anti-Iraq voices in the United States government were itching to pull the trigger and have a second invasion of Iraq, and do it "right" this time. One very credible and well-respected Iraqi exile, Kanan Makiya, wrote an Op-Ed for the *New York Times* that called for a ground invasion of Iraq. In his essay, he listed the merits of toppling Hussein's regime. "Iraq's infrastructure, its middle class, its secular intelligentsia, its high levels of education are all reasons for thinking that a new westward-looking political order can, with the

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<sup>3</sup> "Sykes-Picot Agreement." Encyclopædia Britannica. Accessed January 13, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Sykes-Picot-Agreement>.

<sup>4</sup> "The First Gulf War - Short History - Department History - Office of the Historian." U.S. Department of State. Accessed January 13, 2017. <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/firstgulf>.

help of the west, be set up in Iraq just as it was set up in Japan and Germany after World War II.”<sup>5</sup> It was a very tempting possibility. The United States rarely turns down an offer to create a clone of itself, aligned with its own interests. And a clone so close to the War on Terror and the conflict in the Middle East? Irresistible.

The second invasion of Iraq, lasted just over a month, from late March to early May 2003. Bush told the American people that he had intelligence that Iraq had, or was very close to obtaining, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). In reality, that was shoddy intelligence, which was made embarrassingly obvious when the United States toppled the Hussein regime and found no trace of WMDs. But the invasion was over, Hussein was in custody, and Iraq needed a new leader. When the dust finally settled, in 2006, a United States-approved Prime Minister of Iraq was elected. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is a Shiite, a member of the same group of people who were mercilessly slaughtered and denied basic human rights under the Hussein administration. This new leadership caused problematic Shia-Sunni rifts in Iraq, and being the first democratically elected leader of Iraq, Maliki had his work cut out for him. The new Prime Minister had to deal with a failing oil industry, which provided for 65% of Iraq’s GDP in 2016,<sup>6</sup> sectarian conflicts breaking out all over the country, and rampant corruption, all while facing major Sunni resistance in government and on the streets. It was a recipe for disaster.

The war in Iraq hurt the United States in four major ways. First, it destroyed the infrastructure and weakened the government of Iraq, making it not nearly as useful of an ally as Makiya had suggested it would be. Second, it created a venomous hatred for the United States in an area that already had anti-West sentiments. Third, it created major Sunni-Shia conflicts. ISIS is

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<sup>5</sup> Christian Alfonsi. *Circle in the Sand: Why We Went Back to Iraq*. (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 392.

<sup>6</sup> "About Iraq." UNDP in Iraq. Accessed January 13, 2017. [www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/countryinfo.html](http://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/countryinfo.html).

completely Sunni, and it was fueled in part by a reaction to the inclusive post-war Iraqi government. Most importantly, the war in Iraq caused the creation of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI, the direct predecessor to ISIS.

AQI was founded by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi was a nobody, a deadbeat, a drinker and a thug from the suburbs of Amman, Jordan's capital. When he was in his early thirties, he took part in the Afghan insurgency against the Soviet Union. He was involved in a couple of botched terrorist attacks and a handful of bloody battles that ripped across post-occupation Afghanistan in the 1990s. He also spent six years in prison, learning about Wahhabism, the twisted and fundamentalist version of Islam that ISIS currently enforces, and talking to fellow jihadists. This period, especially his time in prison, changed him. He went from being a just a man "floundering about,"<sup>7</sup> as one of his fellow jihadists described him, to being a man with a purpose. In the early 2000s, he recruited and grew his network of holy warriors, fighting mainly in Muslim countries like his homeland, Jordan. Slowly, his power grew and grew. Bin-Laden tried to get Zarqawi to swear allegiance to Al-Qaeda, but Zarqawi refused, and bided his time. His moment came after the invasion of Iraq. As the historians Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger say, "postwar Iraq was a recipe for sectarian conflict even without Zarqawi to stir the pot, but he wasted little time exploiting the opening."<sup>8</sup> After Zarqawi carried out an attack on a Shia temple that killed over ninety-five people, Zarqawi swore fealty to Bin-Laden in October of 2004, and announced the creation of his own jihadist group, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).<sup>9</sup>

AQI was a huge success. The organization became a magnet for foreign fighters pouring in from the West, began a still-popular campaign of public beheadings, and targeted Shia Muslims in

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<sup>7</sup> Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York, NY: Ecco Press, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 14.

<sup>8</sup> *The State of Terror*, 21

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

their attacks and executions. This deepened an already deep rift between Al-Qaeda and AQI. While Al-Qaeda was more anti-West, AQI was more anti-Shia, and this was seen by other groups in the region as a move that would weaken the radical Islamic world as a whole, and was not the right direction to move in. However, there was extreme resentment of Shia Muslims, beginning with a disagreement on who should succeed Muhammad that started over 1,500 years ago, and heightened by the election of a Shiite President in Iraq, so even when Zarqawi was killed in a United States airstrike in June of 2006, AQI had plenty of support to become the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), and transition smoothly to a new leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. But to become the terrifying force that is ISIS today, ISI had to get more support. And what better place to get it than from an American prison?

War prisons in Iraq were breeding grounds for terrorists, as Zarqawi demonstrated in the 90s. Seen as “little more than social networking furloughs for jihadists”<sup>10</sup> the Islamic State looked to prisons for their next batch of fresh-faced Shia and infidel murderers. One notorious prison, Camp Bucca, was the biggest of the jihadi farms. By one United States estimate, 1,350 hardcore terrorists were housed with 15,000 people being held as prisoners of war or for other crimes, with no separation whatsoever. <sup>11</sup>People who were already resentful of the United States for imprisoning them in their own country were recruited to seek revenge on their captors after they got out. Major General Doug Stone, a United States officer who worked on reforming Camp Bucca said, “If you’re trying to build an army, prison is the perfect place to do it. We gave them health care, dental, fed them, and, most importantly, kept them from getting killed in combat.”<sup>12</sup> A former ISIS member added in an interview with *The Guardian*, “We could never have all got together like

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *Isis: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York, NY: Regan Arts, 2015), 83.

<sup>11</sup> *Inside the Army of Terror*, 83

<sup>12</sup> *Inside the Army of Terror*, 86

this in Baghdad, or anywhere else. It would have been impossibly dangerous. Here we were not only safe, but we were only a few hundred [meters] away from the entire al-Qaeda leadership.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, about 70% of inmates at Bucca were released within a year of their imprisonment, despite their involvement with terrorist organizations or their violent acts against the Iraqi government and the United States.<sup>14</sup> You go in, you’re held just long enough to have a burning hatred for the West, you get recruited to ISIS, ISI, or Al-Qaeda, and you are set free.

The army was built, and they were out for blood. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed in an American airstrike, so his son, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was the new leader. Following in the footsteps of ISIS’s grandfather, Zarqawi, al-Baghdadi lay in wait for the opportune moment. Trigger fingers were just starting to get itchy when a Tunisian fruit monger publicly burned himself in protest of his oppressive government, sparking the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA), the main rebel group in Syria, was initially supported by the West and the Arab League, namely the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia. However, “supported by” quickly turned to “controlled by,” which pushed away the majority of its fighters, who then turned to ISIS, a group that could support itself and was not in league with any foreign nation. As the sectarian conflict in Iraq that ISI was dominating was starting to slow down, the FSA began its revolution. This, combined with the mass influx of FSA defectors, caused ISIS to flourish on a new front: Syria.<sup>15</sup>

War breeds terror. As one war drew to a close, another one started, restarting the first one and creating a vicious cycle. The United States tried to interfere in the only way it knows how:

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Inside the Army of Terror*, 87

<sup>15</sup> Kevin M. DeJesus, *ISIS: The Rise of the Islamic State* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016), 9.

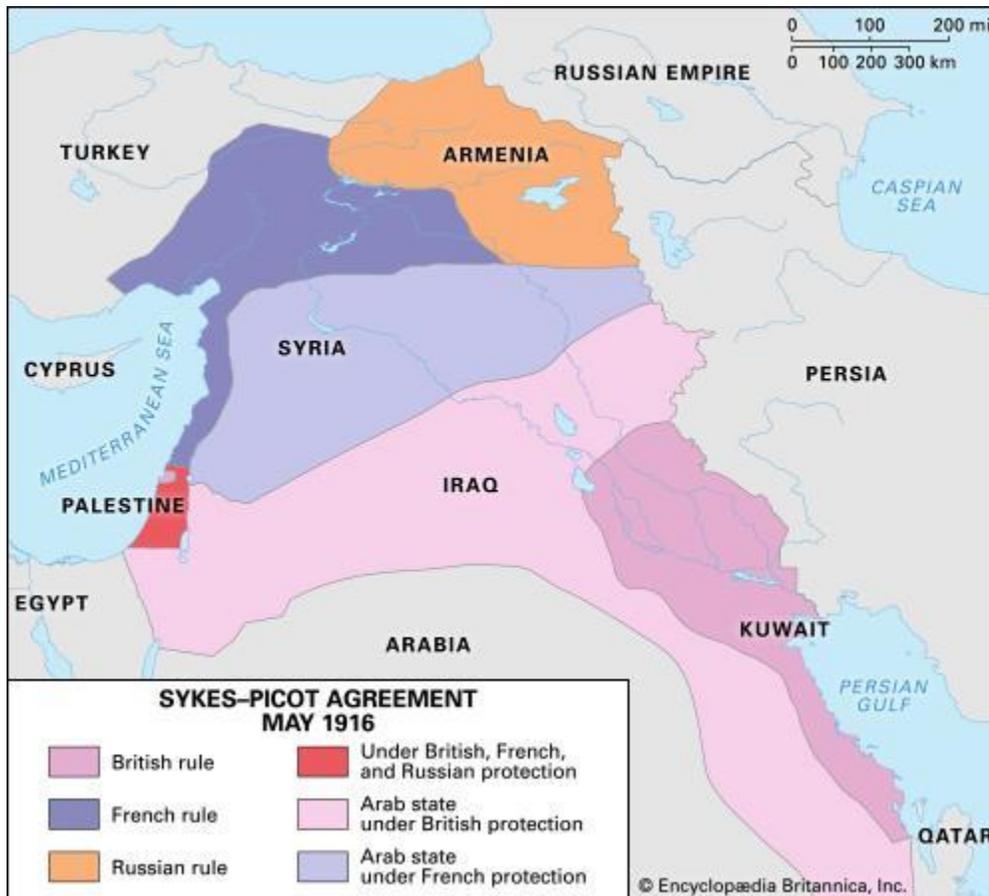
“bomb the hell out of ISIS.”<sup>16</sup> That is a conventional war tactic, but ISIS is no conventional enemy. They are not a state but a group of underground fighters, with no infrastructure, no formal military, no base of operations, and no civilians that they need to protect. ISIS uses guerilla war tactics, suicide bombings and mass shootings on foreign soil to win victories. No one can bomb that. But when the United States tries, it simply pushes people to join ISIS. Because of massive civilian casualties at the hands of the United States, virtually every rebel group, ISIS-affiliated or not, sees the United States as their enemy, despite protestations to the contrary.<sup>17</sup> As this bombing campaign continues under the Trump administration, as it would have under Clinton’s, the United States will have to face the true consequences of the havoc it is wreaking. Every single bomb that is dropped is one more killed family member, one more broken heart, and one more recruit for ISIS.

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<sup>16</sup> Donald Trump, in a radio advertisement that can be found at [www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/11/18/donald-trump-promises-to-bomb-the-hell-out-of-isis-in-new-radio-ad/?utm\\_term=.7c16295bdaf3](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/11/18/donald-trump-promises-to-bomb-the-hell-out-of-isis-in-new-radio-ad/?utm_term=.7c16295bdaf3)

<sup>17</sup> *The Rise of the Islamic State*, 25

## Appendix I



This map, courtesy of the Encyclopedia Britannica, shows the division of land between Russia, Great Britain, and France that was determined in the Sykes Picot Agreement of 1916.

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