The Making of IS: U.S. Contributions to the Development of the Islamic State

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On January 27, 2014 U.S. President Barack Obama labeled the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also known as ISIS or ISIL) a "J.V. team,"[1] referring to the fact that the group was a relatively new actor on the global Salafi-jihadist stage, a stage largely dominated by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The statement reflected the administration's belief that the organization was relatively weak as compared to the larger, more establish al-Qaeda Central. Although the group had only officially announced itself as 'The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' in April 2013, it was anything but a new actor; the group's roots lie in the radicalization of Ahmad Fadil al-Nazal al-Khalayleh[2]. Known most prominently as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, he was the infamous leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI,) the predecessor to the Islamic State of Iraq, now ISIS. Not only had al-Zarqawi been operating in Iraq since early 2003, he was one of the leaders of Iraq's insurgency after the U.S. invasion; thus, we have been dealing with this so called "J.V. team" and its various reincarnations for over a decade as part of the global war on terror, embarked upon by the Bush administration post 9/11. Before discussing the development of the Islamic State, we must first understand why it is classified as a terrorist organization as well as the ideology that it operates from.

Two characteristics of terrorism set it apart from other forms of violence: the targeting of non-combatants and the use of violence to instill fear and terror amidst the target population. Islamic jurisprudential tradition, based in part on the sayings and deeds of the Prophet, informs us that Islamic law forbids the explicit targeting of non-combatants,[3] and there is evidence that the Islamic State understands these limits, claiming civilian deaths as collateral damage in some

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[1] Sinha, Shreeya. "Obama's Evolution on ISIS." The New York Times. June 09, 2015. Accessed November 6, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/09/world/middleeast/obama-isis-strategy.html.
[2] Warrick, Joby. *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*. (New York: Random House, 2015), 20. ; Gerges, Fawaz A. *ISIS: a history*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 52.
[3] Kelsay, John. *Arguing the just war in Islam*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 104-124.

cases. Despite this, the Islamic State has consistently used tactics that qualify it as a terrorist organization on the basis of targeting non-combatants and using violence in order to instill fear in its target population, such as releasing videos of IS militants beheading their prisoners.

As for its ideology, the Islamic State falls under the category of Salafism, which is an umbrella term characterizing groups whose objective is ultimately to revive the traditional Islamic life, imposing Sharia law to all aspects of life in an effort to model the current age after that of Islam's founders, the *Salaf*.[4] This ideology encompasses a variety of opinions on how best to achieve this end; in fact, the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq eventually split with his mentor as well as al-Qaeda Central as a result of one such difference of opinion over the validity of applying *takfirism*[5] to Shia Muslims. The Islamic State presents itself as a refuge for Muslims around the world, where they may live assured that they are abiding by the rules of Islam,[6] and as a result of the organization's employment of *takfirism*, it is firmly rooted in the sectarian divide between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

The Islamic State's central goal has always been to restore the Islamic caliphate, and its struggle initially was obtaining the territory upon which to establish it. This aim, along with its focus on the "near enemy," *takfiris* as opposed to the "far enemy," the West, has set it apart from other Salafi-jihadi organizations such as al-Qaeda Central. Despite this focus, they have attracted followers from around the globe, positioning themselves as a global-jihadi movement that allows them to carry out attacks across the world when necessary.[7] Thus, the Islamic State

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[4] Fradkin, Hillel. "The history and unwritten future of Salafism." *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 6 (2008): 7-8.
[5] *Takfirism* refers to the Islamic practice of judging someone to be an unbeliever or not a true Muslim. In its most extreme, adopted by al-Zarqawi, Shia Muslims are deemed apostates by Sunni Muslims, and considered an enemy to be fought.
[6] Stern, Jessica, and John M. Berger. *ISIS: The state of terror*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 6. ; Weiss, Michael, and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the army of terror*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), xv.
[7] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 223-250.

is not only a danger to the West, but to the governments and populations of the Middle East as well, and its roots lie with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

As of 1989, years before the establishment of al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Zarqawi was a nobody—a foot soldier in the fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Today, the U.S. has been fighting his legacy, al-Qaeda in Iraq and its various reincarnations, for over a decade. The success of al-Zarqawi amidst Occupation Iraqi Freedom is no coincidence; it is paramount that a critical eye be taken to the relationship between these two events in order to understand the ways in which U.S. failures in Iraq and the years that followed contributed to the development of the Islamic State as it stands today. As of 2016, IS ruled over a population of between six and nine million people and operated an army of at least 30,000.[8] It has managed to achieve this level of success by capitalizing on the institutional voids left behind by the United States in Iraq and created by the al-Assad regime in Syria. Additionally, IS has exploited and further encouraged sectarian conflicts so that it may present itself as the leader of a pan-Sunni movement struggling against their Shia rulers. Though it is interesting and valuable to track the history and development of the Islamic State, what is most fundamental is to question why it has happened.

The current paper seeks not only to put forth a coherent timeline of the group's evolution, but to analyze the role that the United States specifically has played in it. The U.S. has been at war with al-Zarqawi and his successors for years, and it would be naïve to consider its effects on the group to be minimal; not only did the U.S. create instability in Iraq that al-Zarqawi took advantage of, but it also neglected to intervene in Syria in any serious way even after it was clear that the Islamic State had found refuge there. While U.S. actions in Iraq fueled the expansion of the group, so too did its inaction in Syria. In other words, even after the last U.S. troop left Iraq,

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[8] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 1.

the Islamic State did not exist in a void, it continued to be affected by the decisions that

Washington made about what aid (if any) to send, when to send it, and who the recipients of that

aid would be. I argue that a number of these decisions, made from 2003 to date, have in fact

bolstered the success of the Islamic State.

What follows is, as I mentioned, a timeline of the evolution of the Islamic State, as we

call it today. Importantly, the organization will always be referred to by its name *at the time*;

thus, multiple names for the organization will appear throughout the paper, but the transition

from one to the next will be clear. Year by year, the paper addresses U.S. foreign policy relevant

to the development of the Islamic State as well as the status of the organization at that time. By

analyzing these factors together rather than focusing on one alone it becomes possible to identify

the effects that U.S. policy has had on the development of the Islamic State. Necessarily, we

begin with Operation Iraqi Freedom, undertaken by the United States in 2003, and continue to

focus extensively on events in Iraq until the beginning of the Syrian Arab Spring in 2011. At

this time, the Islamic State expanded its operations into Syria; thus investigating U.S. policy

towards Syria is necessary for a complete analysis of the ways by which it benefited the Islamic

State.

The U.S. was militarily unprepared for what would occur in Iraq post-invasion, and thus

implemented policies such as de-Ba'athification that only served to heighten the emerging

discontent among the Iraqi population. Additionally, the willful ignorance of a growing

insurgency and the purposeful separation of Shia and Sunni communities are among the policy

decisions made by the U.S. in Iraq that allowed the Islamic State to take root there. Within a

year of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, the Syrian Arab Spring sprung, and the Islamic State took

advantage of the similar institutional voids and sectarian conflicts there that it had capitalized on in Iraq.

Despite witnessing these developments, the United States did not intervene, even when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad crossed the "red line" designated by President Obama. Though President Bashar al-Assad is not a member of the Islamic State, these events are related, because the absence of U.S. support forced rebels to look elsewhere for reinforcement. And to whom did they turn? The Islamic State.

Previous accounts of the development of the Islamic State have focused primarily on the history of the group as if it developed in a void, focusing on the background of its leaders, its partnership and eventual split with al-Qaeda Central, its military operations and its efforts to recruit members from around the world. Though none of these accounts purport that the Islamic State indeed developed in a void, they focus primarily on detailing its development rather than explaining that development. While all of the complexities of war cannot possibly be addressed in a single work, it is essential to move beyond these initial assessments of the Islamic State so that we may answer the question, how? How has the Islamic State, one of the most brutal organizations that history has seen, managed to attract followers and continue to expand? How, after being almost completely decimated in Iraq by 2010, did it manage to reemerge in Syria? These questions are of the utmost importance if we hope to defeat the Islamic State once and for all. The current paper provides an account of only one aspect of the organization's success; that is the assistance that the United States has provided, unwittingly or not, to IS since the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Before diving head first into U.S. military operations in Iraq, it is useful to discuss a bit of Iraqi history, because despite the fact that a Sunni minority ruled over a Shia majority, the latter

half of the twentieth century saw the development of a national Iraqi identity that superceded

sectarian tensions in the country. The development of secular state institutions under Saddam

Hussein that provided a nonreligious education system built up an Iraqi national identity that

supplanted religious sectarian divisions.[9] The ruling ideology, Saddam Hussein's Ba'athism,

helped to subdue the sectarian divide over time and a sense of patriotism developed, especially

within the Iraqi military, where Shia and Sunni fought side by side during the Iran-Iraq war of

the late 1980's.[10] Additionally, no relationship existed between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and

Salafi-jihadi organizations such as al-Qaeda, despite this being one of the primary motivations

attributed to Operation Iraqi Freedom.[11] That being said, although nothing close to the sectarian

divisions that the U.S. invasion and al-Zarqawi would inspire in the coming years, the sense of

Iraqi nationhood that had evolved in the mid-twentieth century began to weaken in the 1990's.

Towards the end of the millennium, economic conditions in Iraq began to deteriorate; as

a result, Saddam Hussein undertook what is known as the Faith Campaign in order to secure his

rule amidst the worsening economic situation.[12] The state of Iraq's economy resulted from the

disastrous Iran-Iraq war of the 1980's as well as the international sanctions that were levied

against Iraq in response to the First Gulf War and Saddam Hussein's brutal suppression of

rebellions led by Iraq's Shia and Kurdish populations in 1991. Reacting to these conditions,

many Iraqis began relying on their tribal communities and connections, because, unlike the

government, the tribes were capable of meeting their needs.[13] At the same time, Saddam

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[9] Ismael, Tareq Y., and Max Fuller. 2008. "The disintegration of Iraq: the manufacturing and politicization of sectarianism." *International Journal Of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 2, no. 3: 443-473.
[10] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 135.
[11] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 50.
[12] Ibid., 157.
[13] Cottam, Martha L., and Joe W. Huseby. *Confronting Al Qaeda: The Sunni Awakening and American Strategy in Al Anbar*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 10. ; Haddad, Fanar. *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic visions of unity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 96.

Hussein initiated the Faith Campaign, which included reintroducing the call the prayer in the media, freeing prisoners who could memorize the Qur'an, and establishing the *Jami'at Saddam lil-'Ulum al-Islamiyya*, the Saddam University for Islamic Studies, among other efforts.[14]

As mentioned previously, these efforts were an attempt by Saddam Hussein to preserve his rule in a weakening state that had many Iraqis doubting the capability of his government; he remained a firm nationalist, and throughout the 1990's some argue, including Iraqi sociology professor Saad Jawad and political economist Kamil Mahdi, that a severe sectarian divide was nonexistent between Iraqi's Sunni and Shia populations.[15] This is not to say that there were not divisions amongst the Iraqi population at all. Historically, Iraq's ethnic Kurdish population has resisted the rule of the Iraqi government. This division has been the root of multiple conflicts within the last half century, including the Halabja Massacre in 1988 that left 5,000 Iraqi Kurds dead. One year later the Anfal Campaign resulted in the deaths of 180,000 Kurds, and in 1991 Kurdish and Shia rebels were violently suppressed in the aftermath of the First Gulf War. While Kurdish participation reflected a long-standing ethnic division in Iraqi society, the participation of Shia Iraqis in the 1991 rebellion should be viewed as a revolt against Sunni minority rule in the context of the worsening economic conditions that began to slowly chip away at the national identity that had evolved by the 1980's. It is this religious division that was later reinforced by decisions made by the U.S. post-invasion and by the efforts of al-Zarqawi so that he could

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[14] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 61-62. ; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 23.

[15] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 62, 157; See full text of "Voices From The Iraqi Street." International Crisis Group. December 04, 2002. Accessed November 28, 2016. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/voices-iraqi-street.; Taras, Raymond. "THE (IL)LOGIC OF INTERVENTION IN IRAQ: SECTARIANISM, CIVIL WAR, AND THE U.S. GAME PLAN." *International Journal on World Peace* 23, no. 4 (2006): 33-60; "Iraq Backgrounder: What Lies Beneath." International Crisis Group. October 01, 2002. Accessed November 28, 2016. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/iraq-backgrounder-what-lies-beneath.; For more on the sectarian division pre- and post-invasion, refer to Ismael and Fuller, "The Disintegration of Iraq."

capitalize on Sunni discontent.[16] This was the structure of Iraqi society when Operation Iraqi Freedom was initiated, but that is only one half of the equation. The second is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had gotten his start as a foreign jihadi fighter in Afghanistan before appearing in Iraq.

To reiterate, the U.S. invasion of Iraq was not the sole impetus for the emergence of the Islamic State. It can be argued that pre-existing sectarian divisions were worsening to the extent that a second Shia rebellion was on the horizon, and that Saddam Hussein may have been deposed even if the invasion had not occurred. However, if sectarian divisions had been exacerbated to the point that a revolution was characterized as Shia, not Iraqi national, almost certainly a Sunni insurgency would have developed in opposition. If successful, a Shia revolution would have resulted in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the implementation of a Shia-led government. These are the conditions that resulted from the U.S. invasion; thus, the Sunni insurgency that evolves in this counterfactual is the same Sunni insurgency that developed in reality. After the U.S. invasion the leader of IS's predecessor organization, al-Zarqawi, took advantage of the insurgency that developed against the Americans and only later stoked the religious-sectarian fire that is IS's hallmark. In our counterfactual, a Sunni insurgency responding to a Shia-led revolution would have already had this sectarian flavor, allowing al-Zarqawi to commandeer the insurgency that much faster. What is common to both scenarios is the emergence of a group led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; what the United States may have done in response to such a development in the aftermath of a Shia-led revolution is beyond the scope of this paper. The fact of the matter is that while the U.S. is not solely responsible for the

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[16] Ismael and Fuller, "The Disintegration of Iraq."

development of the Islamic State, it initially ignored the insurgency that fostered it, and later made decisions that contributed to its evolution.

The authors of *ISIS: The State of Terror* argue that the "roots [of IS] lie with Zarqawi and the 2003 invasion of Iraq that gave him purpose."[17] Though they are correct that al-Zarqawi is the group's founding father, he found purpose far before that; the invasion merely supplied him the *means* by which to carry out his radical[18] Salafi-jihadi agenda. To be brief, as he will be discussed thoroughly in the following pages, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was a prisoner in Jordan's al-Jafr prison in 1998, where he developed a consequential relationship with Isam Muhammad Tahir al-Barqawi, known as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.[19] Al-Maqdisi, considered one of "the most influential thinkers of Salafi-jihadism" became a mentor to al-Zarqawi, and it was under his tutelage that all-Zarqawi transformed from insignificant fighter to capable leader.[20] Upon his release from al-Jafr in 1999, he returned to Afghanistan, and when the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan began, he fled to Iraq, which is where our analysis begins.

2002/2003: Operation Iraqi Freedom Gets Underway

From the outset, Operation Iraqi Freedom was not defined, and thus not designed, according to what became the ultimate goal of the mission: political transformation. The mission was designed to dispose of Saddam Hussein, period; to decapitate the regime, anticipating that

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[17] Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror*, 13.
[18] In this context, I am not using 'radical' to describe al-Zarqawi's certain brand of Islam. He subscribed to the Salafi-jihadi ideology, which is also dubbed "radical Islamism," but here I am referring to the fact that al-Zarqawi was a radical even amongst his Salafi-jihadist peers. His insistence that term *takfiri* applied to Shia Muslims eventually estranged him from his mentor, al-Maqdisi as well as his financiers, al-Qaeda Central. For further information on this schism, see *ISIS: A History*, p. 57
[19] Weaver, Mary Anne. The Atlantic. June 8, 2006. Accessed November 06, 2016. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/.; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 17.
[20] McCants, William, Jarret Brachman, and Joseph Felter. *Militant ideology atlas: Executive report*. (Military Academy West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006), 6.

the rest of society would continue to function as it had previously. This focus on regime *removal* rather than regime *change* framed the way that planners thought about the invasion: regime *removal* did not require troops to oversee the transition of power, as regime *change* would. [21] A central debate, as one would expect, revolved around how many troops to deploy for the operation. The decision to invade Iraq came on the heels of the war in Afghanistan; thus, the rapid successes experienced in that war informed the discourse on when and how to invade Iraq. [22]

This led to dangerous assumptions about the number of troops and the type of forces that would be necessary for success in Iraq. While Army General Tommy Franks, head of United States Central Command at the time of the invasion of Iraq, argued for a large ground force, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld pushed for a limited ground force, compensated by increased participation by Special Operations forces. [23] At the heart of this debate was the need to reconcile deployment speed and troop size, which correlate positively: the larger the troop size, the longer the time needed to deploy them in full. However, decisions about deployment were being made at the same time that diplomatic efforts were being conducted to prevent the invasion. Thus, troop deployments could not begin before it was clear that the diplomatic efforts had failed. [24]

This discrepancy between what was necessary diplomatically versus militarily combined with the goal of regime *removal* rather than regime *change* resulted in the decision to use a

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[21] Donnelly, Thomas. *Operation Iraqi Freedom: A Strategic Assessment*. (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2004), 35-39.

[22] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 29.; Ferguson, Charles. *No End in Sight: Iraq's Descent into Chaos*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 32-33.

[23] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 35. ; Woodward, Bob. "Attack Was 48 Hours Old When It 'Began'" March 23, 2003. Accessed November 6, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/03/23/attack-was-48-hours-old-when-it-began/9bb2a06f-7b30-4d65-945c-fc98aa621e68/.

[24] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 37-38.

"rolling start" deployment scheme rather than a "generated start," a decision made during Summer 2002 as planning for the invasion accelerated. Whereas a generated start called for the deployment of five to seven divisions prior to the invasion, a running start allowed for forces to be deployed in force packages, incrementally.[25] While a generated start was beneficial because it allowed the full force to be engaged from the outset, a running start would provide the maximum amount of time for diplomatic measures to succeed. This leeway for diplomacy was critical, as the U.S. was attempting to convince the international community that an invasion was legitimate if Saddam refused to step down.

In addition to concerns about troop size and deployment time, planners evaluated the ability and willingness of the Iraqi army to resist American forces. Planners believed that the Iraqi Army had never fully recovered from Operation Desert Storm, and thus their primary concern was the state of the Republican Guard. As it was decided that this group represented the greatest military challenge, the planning of military operations focused increasingly on the assault on Baghdad. Although there was some expectation of resistance from the so called "Sunni heartland" in northern Iraq, little attention was given to the supporting operations that would occur in the north.

Opinions continued to differ on the scale of this resistance and thus on the number of troops necessary to subdue it as late as February 25, 2003, less than a month before the invasion. This is evidenced by the conflicting statements of Secretary Rumsfeld and Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki. Shinseki stated that it was possible that post-invasion stability operations would require hundreds of thousands of dollars, while two days later Rumsfeld dismissed this

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[25] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 29; Gordon, Michael R., and Bernard E. Trainor. *Cobra II: The inside story of the invasion and occupation of Iraq*. (New York: Vintage, 2006), 57-58.

estimate as "off the mark."[26] These statements reflect a fundamental divide among the leaders of Operation Iraqi Freedom even after the official plan of attack had been adopted; the final plan was a compromise between these two positions, and resulted in a watered down force that allowed time for diplomacy to run its course but left American forces unprepared and under-equipped to manage post-invasion Iraq.

The official war plan, Cobra II, was adopted in December 2002. It employed a running start deployment scheme that consisted of four force packages that would be deployed on an as-needed basis, rather than continuing steadily once initiated, allowing the U.S. to halt the process at any given time. For example, according to the adopted plan, the Third Infantry Division would be deployed first and only then would the 101st Airborne be deployed, followed by the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment, and so on.[27] In fact, President Bush directed Rumsfeld to decelerate troop movements in early February 2003, just before the invasion, because he felt that diplomatic measures would be threatened if they continued as fast as they had been.[28] In other words, President Bush was worried it would appear that the U.S. had already settled on invading without giving diplomacy a fair chance.

Though this plan succeeded in maximizing time spent on diplomatic efforts, it slowed down troop deployments that some, including General Shinseki, thought were vital to the capture of Baghdad, which was the focus of military operations. Furthermore, under the adopted scheme deployment of support troops was delayed, meaning force packages that were meant to operate with these support troops would have to make do without them.[29] The invasion officially began

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[26] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 46.; Ferguson, Charles. *No End in Sight*, 24-28.
[27] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 47.
[28] Woodward, Bob. *Plan of attack*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 319.
[29] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 46-49.

on March 20, 2003 and by April 9 Saddam Hussein's regime had effectively collapsed[30]; the Cobra II plan had provided sufficient troops to secure regime *removal*, but what followed revealed just how deficient the plan was in terms of its capacity for stability operations. The extensive looting that occurred in Iraqi cities as a result of this serious lack of foresight on the part of the United States was compounded by the decision to implement de-Ba'athification. Together these policies were the fertile ground from which the Iraqi insurgency was born.

The first phase of the invasion involved the seizure of the oil fields in southern Iraq, the isolation of the city of Basra, and securing the bridges over the Euphrates River in Nasiriyah. These operations began on March 20 and were followed by Phase II, the advance to Baghdad.[31] April 3 marked the beginning of the disintegration of Saddam Hussein's regime, when American forces attacked the Saddam International Airport, now the Baghdad International Airport. By the following day, U.S. troops had secured control of the airport and turned towards the city center.

Because of the small force size relative to the population of Baghdad, roughly five million, the concept of the "thunder run" was developed as a means to avoid becoming bogged down in what would almost certainly be a very bloody "house-to-house" fight in an urban center.[32] These thunder runs consisted of massive raids by tanks and other infantry fighting vehicles in order to crush any resistance in the city rather than engaging in street fights. The first of these occurred on April 5, followed the next day by a second thunder run that employed twice the number of tanks. By April 9 the regime had collapsed along with the now famous statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square, and 2,000 Iraqis were dead. Almost immediately the looting began, prompting Secretary Rumsfeld to dismiss it as a natural byproduct of liberation.

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[30] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 81.; Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 409.
[31] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 53.; Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 379.
[32] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 78. ; Gordon and Trainor, "The Thunder Run," in *Cobra II*.

While looting may have been an expected side effect of the invasion, the real issue is that U.S. troops were not prepared to control the city of Baghdad once they attacked. They may have dissolved the regime, but that did not equate to control of the city, a fact that became increasingly apparent as the looting spread to hospitals, schools, and cultural sites. The number of forces was not sufficient to cease looting entirely, but a list was developed by Tom Warrick, director of the State Department's Future of Iraq Project, and passed along to the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA,) headed by General Jay Garner, of the sites that were to be secured first. However, in another misstep by the United States, the ORHA was located quite a distance away from the action, in Kuwait.[33]

The Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance was established to not only plan post-invasion tasks in Iraq, but also to implement those plans. Such tasks included providing humanitarian relief, protecting nature resources and infrastructure, and conducting interagency relations, among other things.[34] For an office tasked with such extensive responsibilities, its existence so far from Central Command (CENTCOM) proved to be a mistake. Upon receiving news of the ongoing pillaging, the ORHA sent a list of sixteen vulnerable site that required immediate protection. At the top of the list were Iraq's national bank as well as the national museum; sixteenth on the list was the oil ministry.[35] Two weeks passed before the ORHA was informed that the list had not even been read; moreover, one of the few sites to be protected was the oil ministry while the national museum was pillaged. The fact

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[33] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 84-87.; Ismael and Fuller, "The Disintegration of Iraq."
[34] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 283
[35] Rothfield, Lawrence. *The rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the looting of the Iraq Museum*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 78.

that U.S. forces stood by as schools and cultural site were ransacked led Iraqis to view them as ineffective and, perhaps worse, indifferent.[36]

Iraqi public opinion began to see the Americans as invaders, not liberators, as self interested and untrustworthy when it came to providing stability and protection when the need for those things were steadily increasing. This sentiment was amplified when the Coalition Provisional Authority, led by L. Paul Bremer, implemented the de-Ba'athification policy in May 2003.[37] Despite previous missteps made by the ORHA, General Jay Garner had been working to rebuild Iraqi society and had decided to leave Sunni leadership in place, whenever possible, so as to disrupt government services as little as possible.[38] In one fell swoop, Garner's decision was reversed based on a suggestion made before the invasion, on March 10 by Frank Miller, the National Security Council's director for Defense.[39]

When Bremer announced the decision to implement de-Ba'athification, an Iraqi member of General Garner's ORHA team attempted to convince him that it was a mistake, claiming that it would be a disaster.[40] In the coming months, the U.S. would come to realize the truth of these words, but on May 16 the first de-Ba'athification measure was implemented, followed by the second measure on May 23, which dissolved the Iraqi army, Republican Guard, paramilitary organizations, intelligence services, and the Ministry of Defense, among other government organizations. It is estimated that his order resulted in the unemployment of 500,000 to 800,000

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[36] Mintz, Alex, and Carly Wayne. *The Polythink syndrome: US foreign policy decisions on 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and ISIS*. (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2016), 105.; Caldwell, Dan. *Vortex of conflict: US policy toward Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq*. (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2011), 176.; Warrick, Joby. *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*. (New York: Random House, 2015), 118. Ricks, Thomas E. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. (London: Penguin, 2006), 135-137.
[37] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 31-36.
[38] Perry, Mark. *Talking to Terrorists: Why America Must Engage with Its Enemies*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 36.
[39] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 339.
[40] Perry, *Talking to Terrorists*, 37.

men, many with considerable military experience and access to weapons.[41] Not only did this leave thousands of Iraqi men disenfranchised and without an income, but it also reinforced the view that the American forces were untrustworthy, because government employees were dismissed based on rank rather than their behavior, despite the fact that many were only nominally members of the Ba'ath party.

Many government employees joined the Ba'ath party in order to secure employment in Saddam's government while not actually subscribing to the beliefs of the party. A provision existed to excuse these people from the de-Ba'athification policy, but in reality these exceptions were never made. Thus, the Sunnis that occupied a majority of these positions were fired, and as such de-Ba'athification was viewed as a discriminatory policy being carried out by the new Shia rulers, empowered by the United States, against Iraq's Sunni Muslims.[42] This policy further damaged U.S. stability operations by severely inhibiting its ability to construct an Iraqi police force, because fired employees were banned from any public sector employment.[43]

The ultimate effects of this policy were colossal; the disenfranchised Sunni population was increasingly resentful of the American presence in Iraq. Simultaneously, the intelligence gathering capacity of the Iraqi government as well as its capacity for military operations had been severely diminished. Taken together, these factors allowed the budding insurgency to develop relatively unhindered throughout the Spring of 2003, while U.S. military operations were focused primarily on seeking out former regime Ba'athists.[44] Additionally, the

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[41] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 32.; Ferguson, Charles. *No End in Sight*, 142-158.
[42] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 69.
[43] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 39.
[44] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom* 88.; Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 59.; Ferguson, *No End in Sight*, 315.

substantially decreased border guard that resulted from the depletion of the Iraqi army allowed foreign fighters to cross into Iraq rather freely in order to join the nascent insurgency.

Thus far, the U.S. decisions to adopt a running start deployment scheme and to limit the force size overall had demanded the implementation of strategies such as the thunder runs that left thousands of Iraqis dead while Americans stormed through the streets in armored tanks. Additionally, the depleted force size restricted U.S. capacity for policing, and priority was given to protecting sites important to American interests rather than curbing the looting overall. As attitudes towards the Americans began to transform, an insurgency developed, particularly in northern Iraq's al-Anbar province, where vulnerable Sunnis had returned after being rejected by the new government. A third consequence of the diminished force size, as well as the implementation of de-Ba'athification, was the lack of a competent border control. Although he was already living in Iraq, one operative that took advantage of the limited border security was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who funneled foreign fighters into Iraq to join his organization.[45]

After a brief stint in prison in his native Jordan, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi travelled to Afghanistan to fight the jihad against the Soviet invaders in 1989. Though he arrived just as the Soviets were packing up, he remained in Afghanistan where he was exposed to al-Qaeda Central as well as his would-be mentor, Shiekh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. In 1992, the pair returned to Jordan together and formed the organization *Bayt al-Imam*.[46] A year later they were both arrested for possession of illegal weapons and belonging to a banned jihadi organization. Both were sentenced to fifteen years in prison; it was this arrest that landed the pair in al-Jafr, where

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[45] Lister, Charles R. *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 34.
[46] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 60.; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 54.

al-Maqdisi counseled al-Zarqawi on leadership as the duo expanded the influence of their organization.[47]

Upon al-Zarqawi's release in 1999[48] he returned to Afghanistan where he set up a training camp in Herat, known as *Jund al-Islam*.[49] When the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001al-Zarqawi fled to Iraqi Kurdistan where he joined the jihadist organization Ansar al-Islam.[50] The rise of this group in Iraqi Kurdistan was a consequence of Saddam Hussein's brutal attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan in 1988. After these attacks, U.S. aircraft patrolled the area in an effort to prevent Saddam's military from attacking again, allowing these populations to live relatively independently. However, with relative independence came a significant lack of authority, which allowed the jihadist group to also seek refuge in the area. It is within this context that the U.S. attempted to associate al-Zarqawi, a relatively unknown jihadist fighter, with Saddam Hussein's regime.

The link between al-Zarqawi, the Ansar al-Islam camp, and Saddam Hussein's regime is what United States Secretary of State Colin Powell supplied to the United Nations that Iraq was harboring terrorists. The link was also non-existent. While it was true that the Ansar al-Islam camp harbored chemical weapons, that it was a terrorist organization, and that al-Zarqawi was a member, CIA officer Charles Faddis and his team reported that any Iraqi intelligence officers in

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[47] Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror*, 15,; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 9.;Warrick, *Black Flags*, 45.

[48] Despite his fifteen year prison sentence, al-Zarqawi was released in 1999, after having only served five years. He was released as part of a general amnesty, granted by Jordan's new King Abdullah II, who had assumed the position after the death of his father, King Hussein. Traditionally a new king pardons inmates convicted of nonviolent offenses and political crimes as a kind of peace offering. For more on this, see Warrick, *Black Flags,* 42.

[49] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 3.; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 59.; A senior deputy to Osama bin Laden, Mohammed Makkawi, known as Sayf al-Adel, was dispatched to bin Laden to meet with al-Zarqawi in Spring of 2000. Bin Laden had reservations about him because of his strict *takfiri* ideology, so they kept him at arms length while providing financial backing for his training camp. See Warrick, *Black Flags*, 65-68; Moubayed, Sami. "Abu Al-Ghadia to Build on Al-Zarqawi's Legacy in Iraq - Jamestown." Jamestown Foundation. July 10, 2006. Accessed November 06, 2016. http://jamestown.org/brief/abu-al-ghadia-to-build-on-al-zarqawis-legacy-in-iraq/.

[50] Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror,* 17.; Warrick, *Black Flags*, 69.

the area were doing exactly as he was—scoping out the enemy, not supplying them. This was not the information the U.S. expected, and went ahead claiming an association between Saddam's regime and Ansar al-Islam, hoping to convince the United Nations to support their decision to go to war. When Faddis suggested that they had a "golden opportunity" to take out the entire camp in Summer 2002, President Bush refused, saying that an attack may start the war prematurely. When it was considered again in January 2003 in light of new evidence connecting Ansar al-Islam to terrorist cells in Iraq, Faddis was again denied, because wiping out Ansar al-Islam would have significantly undermined the speech that Secretary Powell was about to give to the UN.[51]

By the time President Bush finally authorized an attack on the Ansar al-Islam camp, one week after the invasion had begun, al-Zarqawi was long gone, headed to Baghdad to confront the Americans.[52] Not only did the U.S. transform him into a "terrorist superstar" when Secretary Powell announced that his jihadist organization was being sheltered by Saddam's regime, but they let him slip through their fingers and had provided him time to develop his terrorist network across Iraq.[53] When U.S. forces reached Baghdad, al-Zarqawi was at work stirring up sectarian tensions and fostering an insurgency that U.S. officials refused to recognize while they focused on tracking down regime loyalists.

So dedicated was the U.S. to apprehending former Ba'athists, that in early Summer 2003 troops began systematic sweeps of town, such as Operation Peninsula Strike in Thuyula, Operation Desert Scorpion in central Iraq, and Operation SideWinder in the predominantly Sunni region of Samarra. These operations garnered myriad intelligence, and focused primarily on

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[51] Warrick, *Black Flags* 87-92; Tucker, Mike, and Charles Faddis. *Operation Hotel California: The Clandestine War Inside Iraq*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 15.
[52] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 98.
[53] Ibid., 7.

destroying any inkling of loyalty to Saddam's regime.[54] Operation Soda Mountain was another

such mission, undertaken in July, targeting the Sunni Triangle specifically, where the heart of the

insurgency lay. Importantly, though, no official counter-insurgency had begun at this time, and

an independent Iraqi militia, the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) had only just begun training

with U.S. forces.[55]

Although this new force provided more boots on the ground capable of securing the

population, months of instability had already taken their toll. al-Zarqawi was taking advantage

of the discontent that resonated among Iraq's Sunni populations, and the willful ignorance of the

U.S. in light of the developing insurgency gave him leeway to expand his influence. He did this

by deepening the divide between the Sunni and Shia populations that the U.S. had created when

it placed a Shia Muslim at the head of the interim government and categorically dismissed Sunni

Muslims from government positions.

In addition to expanding this divide, which prevented a nationalistic front from

developing against the U.S., al-Zarqawi directed attacks against non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) such as the UN that symbolized unity.[56] In the absence of organizations that sought to

unify the Iraqi people his strategy was effective, because Iraq's Sunnis would be forced to turn to

his organization for support. In August 2003 there al-Zarqawi designed three attacks that

achieved these goals.

On August 7, the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad was targeted, followed by an attack on

the Baghdad's Canal Hotel on August 19, where the head of the UN mission in Iraq, Sergio

Vieira de Mello, was based. He was killed, along with 22 others. Ten days later, an attack on

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[54] Ferguson, *No End in Sight,* 316-318.
[55] Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 88-93.
[56] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 117.

the Imam Ali Mosque killed a prominent Shia cleric, Ayatollah Mohammed Bakir al-Hakim who had been urging Sunni and Shia populations to work together to fight the Americans. These attacks seem to have represented a breaking point for the U.S., as on August 30 the word insurgency is used for the first time to describe the situation in Iraq.[57]

Despite this small step toward recognizing insurgency Paul Bremer and the CPA voiced their opposition to this categorization, and as the saying goes, acceptance is the first step towards addressing a problem. The continued denial of the developing insurgency left U.S. troops impotent while al-Zarqawi continued to call for Sunni attacks against Shia populations throughout Fall 2003 and expanded attacks against NGOs and coalition forces. The extent of this denial was revealed when, for the second time, Gerry Meyer, the CIA's Station Chief in Baghdad, attempted to convey the gravity of the situation developing in Iraq in a report from November 2003. He pointed out the ineffectiveness of local police forces and addressed the fact that insurgents roamed freely in the streets. He also noted that more and more embittered Sunnis were joining the insurgency as a result of the uptick in sectarian attacks throughout the country. He was fired shortly after he wrote this report, and President Bush announced accelerated plans to hand over security duties to the Iraqi government.[58] In other words, now that the President had deemed the mission accomplished, Iraq was not his circus and the insurgents were not his monkeys.

2004: The Insurgency Expands, al-Qaeda in Iraq is Established

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[57] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 110-117.; Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 98-99.
[58] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 119-121.; Risen, James. *State of war: The secret history of the CIA and the Bush administration*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 137.; Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 95-96.

By 2004 Iraq's al-Anbar province was consumed by insurgent violence, as Sunni Iraqis that had occupied government positions returned to their tribal communities after being relieved of their government posts.[59] Fallujah, considered the heart of the insurgency, and Ramadi, the capital of al-Anbar, were originally meant to maintain a heavy troop presence throughout the invasion, but due to the swiftness with which U.S. troops moved through the area a much smaller force was left behind than had been planned for.[60] While this allowed for an expanded force at Baghdad, it left these two cities vulnerable to insurgent operations. Moreover, the populations of the cities are overwhelmingly Sunni, making Fallujah and Ramadi ideal locations for the insurgency to develop in response to U.S. failures in 2003.

On March 2, simultaneous bombs went of in Baghdad and Karbala, southwest of Baghdad while thousands of Iraqi Shias were celebrating the Day of Ashura. The attack left 180 dead and heightened sectarian tension in Iraq yet again.[61] Rather than addressing these ongoing incidents as part of an insurgency and attempting to unify Shia and Sunni Iraqis against it Operation Vigilant Resolve was ordered on April 3. It was ordered in retaliation for an incident that occurred four days earlier in which four Americans were killed; its aim was to retake the city of Fallujah from various insurgent factions and involved cutting off the city from the outside. Many were outraged, including several members of the Iraqi Governing Council, at this step taken by the U.S. that resulted in 600 dead Iraqis and little progress in expelling the insurgency from the city.[62]

May 13 saw the merger of distinct insurgent factions in the creation of *al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad*, led by al-Zarqawi, and by late summer the group controlled a significant expanse of land

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[59] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 1.
[60] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 32.
[61] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 136.
[62] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 43-44,; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 34.

in Fallujah and Ramadi. al-Zarqawi had been soliciting pledges of allegiance from local tribal leaders in these areas, and it became increasingly dangerous for these communities to associate with American forces. A professor from al-Anbar University that contacted the CPA insisting that increased efforts were necessary to curb the violence spreading through Ramadi was pulled from his car and shot the following day.[63] Despite previous warnings such as that of Gerry Meyer, the U.S. was only just realizing the importance of Sunni tribal support in combating the insurgency, and even then this truth was not universally acknowledged.

In August a detailed plan emerged to train an Auxiliary Security Force that would operate under the American forces in conjunction with the Iraqi Ministry of Defense. Marine Lieutenant General James Conway, who had assumed control of operations in Fallujah in March, approved of the plan, but it was discarded immediately in Washington.[64] Though this plan was rejected, a policy shift that had been in the works since January was finally getting underway. Unfortunately, it would prove to be yet another misstep by the United States.

The Combined Joint Task Force 7 that had operational control over forces in Iraq created a plan that would rearrange the command structure of operations in Iraq from July 2004 forward. The new headquarters was the Multinational Force-Iraq (MNF-I,) and the plan allowed for greater flexibility at the local level. While MNF-I would coordinate economic, diplomatic, and information operations between the U.S. embassy and the Iraqi government, planning of tactical combat operations would be left to subordinates.[65] The transition occurred throughout the spring and summer, but it was ultimately an ineffectual transition. While increased flexibility was a

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[63] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 166.
[64] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 58.
[65] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 83.; Wright, Donald P., and Timothy R. Reese. *The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005: On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign.* (US Government Printing Office, 2008), 172-173.

positive development, the subordinate commanders lacked a clear doctrine on how to implement this plan. For example, some commanders transitioned from performing tactical operations against insurgents to performing both combat and stability operations to combat the insurgency while some continued to focus on capturing and killing the enemy.[66] What was necessary for this plan to succeed was an overarching counterinsurgency doctrine to guide local operations, and without it the insurgency continued to expand amidst uncoordinated and ineffective U.S. troops.

In October al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance, *bayah*, to Osama bin Laden and announced the establishment of *Tanzim Qaedat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*, al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, or al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI.) This marked the first al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq, which had previously been impenetrable for the organization.[67] In the weeks and months following this announcement, the residents of al-Anbar gave support to the organization in large part because of its deep pockets. The group was well-funded and well-armed, and thus capable of protecting the residents against not only U.S. operations but sectarian violence as well. Moreover, the group became increasingly attractive to Iraqis as former military officers joined the group. Evidence suggests that it was the addition of these men to AQI that transformed it into a skilled and organized army rather than a rag-tag band of insurgents.[68] While AQI was becoming stronger, the U.S. continued to reject plans calling for cooperation with the tribes of al-Anbar.

An account of the relationship between the people of al-Anbar and AQI is as follows: Iraqis accept help from AQI and welcome the group into their towns. After attaining control of

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[66] Andres, Mark C. *Adapting the Doctrinal Discourse on Campaign Planning to the Reality of Current Conflicts*. (Fort Leavenworth: Army Command and General Staff College, 2010), 47-48.
[67] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 60.; Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror,* 21.
[68] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 61.; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 149.; Reuter, Christoph. "The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State." Spiegel Online. April 18, 2015. Accessed November 06, 2016. http://spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html.

the towns, AQI begins to terrorize the population and impose traditional Islamic law on all

aspects of life. The residents of the town turn against AQI. While this account may be accurate

in terms of the timeline of events, one crucial bit of information is absent from this story that

portrays the residents of al-Anbar as the misguided supporters of al-Qaeda in Iraq. In reality,

they had no other choice. The American forces had taken away their weapons and the Iraqi

government was allowing sectarian attacks against Sunnis to go unabated.[69] Under these

conditions, their decision was between fighting a highly sophisticated, Salafi-jihadi terrorist

organization with little to no weaponry or to succumb to its demands. As the U.S. continued to

decline proposals of cooperation, the decision was more or less made for them.

     As 2004 came to a close al-Qaeda in Iraq had maintained and expanded its territory

throughout al-Anbar, and set its sights on a new goal: to stop elections set for January 2005.

Diplomat Robert S. Ford understood the danger of allowing elections to take place without

adequately securing the population.[70] He urged President Bush to postpone the elections, but

because of the accelerated timeline that had been laid out in November 2003, the President

insisted the elections stay on schedule.

2005: The Sunni Voice is Quieted

     Robert Ford's fears were realized. Though al-Qaeda in Iraq did not succeed in halting the

election completely, they severely hindered Sunni voter turnout by broadcasting messages

threatening death to those Sunnis who went to the polls. The group also succeeded in preventing

many Sunnis for running for office. The result of these threats were such that in the

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[69] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 65-73.; Hashim, Ahmed. *Insurgency and Counter-insurgency in Iraq*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 76.; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 87.
[70] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 179.

predominantly Sunni province of al-Anbar only 2% of eligible voters exercised that right. In

comparison, some Kurdish regions boasted 92% turnout despite also being a minority in Iraq.

Despite making up over 30% of the Iraqi population, the major Sunni party won only 1.8% of the

vote, equating to five seats on the National Assembly, while the preeminent Kurdish party won

over a quarter of the seats while making up less than 20% of the overall population.[71]

While Sunni Iraqis were being largely controlled by al-Qaeda in Iraq, the U.S. continued

to rely on its ineffectual method of addressing the insurgency, allowing commanders subordinate

to MNF-I to plan and execute their own operations while refusing cooperation with tribal

leaders. In a testimony given to the Senate Intelligence Committee, Porter Goss, the CIA

director at the time, confirmed that Islamic extremists were capitalizing on the Iraqi conflict in

order to recruit new members.[72] While the Washington continued to focus on the possible threat

these jihadists may pose outside of Iraq, local commanders were struggling to find a successful

method of combating the insurgency without adding fuel to the fire. In other words, they were

fumbling to design counterinsurgency operations, including stability operations, on their own.

Colonels H. R. McMaster and Sean McFarland along with Lieutenant Colonel Chris

Hickey were a unique success story to come out of this period, and their experiences in Tal Afar

would become the basis for the most successful strategy that the U.S. employed in Iraq that

began in 2006. In Spring 2005, these men initiated talks with local tribal sheikhs, conducted

security operations, offered contracts for economic development projects, and initiated police

recruitment while the town remained under the control of AQI. By October the troops under his

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[71] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 178-180,; "FairVote - Analysis of Iraqi Elections." FairVote - Analysis of Iraqi Elections. Accessed November 04, 2016. http://archive.fairvote.org/?page=513.
[72] Herbert, Bob. "Iraq, Then and Now." February 21, 2015. Accessed November 04, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/21/opinion/iraq-then-and-now.html.

command had successfully reduced the violence in Tal Afar, working in concert with the Iraqi army. [73]

This initiative also marked the beginning of substantial tribal resistance to AQI[74]; however, this success was not representative of U.S. operations in general at this time. In fact, members of the Albu Mahal tribe of al-Qaim, located near the Syrian border, reached out to both the Iraqi government and American forces for help in securing the area against AQI, but to no avail. There was an attempt by the U.S. in May, Operation Matador, to eradicate AQI from the al-Qaim, but due to the lack of coordination with the locals, many tribal members were killed. After the failure of Operation Matador, the residents of al-Qaim continued to fight against AQI until they were ultimately defeated in September.

Statistics reflect the increasing violence that spread across al-Anbar throughout the spring and summer of 2005. As of mid-August, there were over 50 attacks daily in al-Anbar province, reflecting a 57% increase over the course of six months. Discussions were once again pursued by U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, the Iraq Initiative for Unity, and Talal al-Gaood, a successful businessman from a prominent Iraqi family who had been instrumental in previous talks concerning coordination between the tribes of al-Anbar and U.S. forces; once again, the talks bore no fruit.

As al-Qaeda in Iraq became increasingly domineering, over ten tribes from al-Anbar province united to form the Anbar People's Committee (APC) in December 2005 in a joint effort to dispel AQI.[75] Additionally, Sunni voters turned out in bulk at the elections in the same month that resulted in the election of Nouri al-Maliki as Prime Minister. Major Ben Connable arrived

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[73] Packer, George. "Letter from Iraq: The Lesson of Tal Afar." *New Yorker* (2006): 48.; Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 86.
[74] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 1.
[75] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 76-84.; Perry, *Talking to Terrorists*, 85-100.

in Iraq just as these events occurred, and he observed this changing environment. For the first time, the tribes were working together to oppose al-Zarqawi's organization, with or without U.S. support. He thought this was the ideal moment for the U.S. to increase troop presence to protect and encourage this burgeoning movement.

Instead, General George Casey announced that the next two brigades schedule for deployment would be held back in reserve.[76] Thus, after refusing repeated proposals of increased cooperation throughout 2004 and 2005, the U.S. government then held back forces from Iraq that could have supported the homegrown movement that developed against AQI in al-Anbar at the end of 2005. Luckily, the APC persevered and approached American troops once again in 2006; this meeting led to the formation of the *Sahwa*, the Awakening, militias, also known as the Sons of Iraq.

2006: al-Anbar Awakens

As the tribes of al-Anbar province continued to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq collectively, AQI began retaliating. The first sign of their opposition came on January 5, when a suicide bomb went off at a police recruitment event. The recruitment initiative had seen increasing turnout for three days, and on the fourth day, when around 1,000 recruits showed up, the bomb was detonated, leaving at least 50 Iraqis dead.[77] A month later, on February 22 a set of bombs was detonated at the Askari Mosque in Samarra, one of the most revered Shia sites. This attack

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[76] Michaels, Jim. *A Chance in Hell: The men who triumphed over Iraq's deadliest city and turned the tide of war*. (London: Macmillan, 2010), 100.; Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 84-95.
[77] Michaels, Jim. *A chance in hell: The men who triumphed over Iraq's deadliest city and turned the tide of war*. (London: Macmillan, 2010), 101.; Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 79.

provoked an outbreak of violence between Sunni and Shia Iraqis that left more than 1,300 dead.[78] And large scale attacks were not the only way that AQI knew how to retaliate.

Amidst continued resistance, al-Qaeda in Iraq carried out numerous assassinations of tribal sheikhs in an attempt to deter groups such as the Anbar People's Committee. Despite having been turned down numerous times, the debate raged on within the APC over whether or not to approach the Americans for support. As dangerous as it was to have formed an alliance against AQI, it was considered especially dangerous to associate with the U.S., and the risk had not previously paid off.[79]

On the other hand AQI was attempting to heal the deepening divide between itself and Sunni Iraqis by establishing the Mujahideen Shura Council and offering amnesty to tribal sheikhs who joined the organization.[80] The aim of this organization was to make the insurgency more Iraqi, by uniting five insurgency groups, that were mostly Iraqi in composition, under a shared banner with AQI.[81] The APC did not buy into AQI's attempts at "Iraqization," and decided to approach the Americans once more in early Summer 2006.

This time, discussions over the course of the summer led to an official announcement of the Awakening movement, in September, followed up shortly by the publication of an updated counterinsurgency manual, FM 3-24 for army operations in December.[82] In less than a year the U.S. had changed course entirely in Iraq; in the words of David Petraeus, the surge, the name by

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[78] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 203.
[79] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 80.
[80] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 101.
[81] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 49, 119.
[82] Andres, *Adapting the Doctrinal Discourse*, 49-50.; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 70.; Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 93.; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 103.

which this phase of the war has come to be known, consisted not only of providing more troops, but changing strategy as well.[83]

Shiekh Abd al-Sattar al-Rishawi, or Abu Risha, of the Ramadi tribes emerged as the leader of the Awakening movement, agreeing to provide men from his tribe for the police. These recruits would be trained, armed, and paid by the United States.[84] Because associating with American forces was a substantial risk, other groups were enticed to join the movement by the promise that 20-30% of them would be integrated into the Iraqi army or the local police forces on a permanent basis.[85] Following these developments, Sahwa Councils emerged beyond al-Anbar province, growing to over 80,000 members by 2008.[86]

Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi Prime Minister at the time, formally recognized this movement and allowed members of the Council of the Anbar Awakening to be appointed to the governing council of al-Anbar. The Prime Minister also agreed to absorb Awakening fighters into the national police and army, and by November nearly 3,000 Iraqi men had committed to participate in this initiative.[87] Despite the promise of such an organization, both Shia and Sunni Iraqis remained skeptical.

There was concern on the part of the Iraqi government that the Sahwa militias would become powerful enough to threaten its power, and the U.S. shared this concern.[88] As for the Sunni fighters, they were wary of joining the army because it was predominantly Shia at the

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[83] Boghani, Priyanka. "ISIS's Rise in Iraq Isn't a Surprise." July 29, 2014. Accessed November 04, 2016. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/david-petraeus-isiss-rise-in-iraq-isnt-a-surprise/.; Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror,* 27.

[84] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 70.

[85] Boghani, Priyanka. "ISIS's Rise in Iraq Isn't a Surprise."; Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror,* 28.

[86] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 10.; O'Kane, Maggie, and Ian Black. "Sunni Militia Strike Could Derail US Strategy against Al-Qaida." The Guardian. March 20, 2008. Accessed November 22, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/21/iraq.alqaida.

[87] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 98-101.; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 71.

[88] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 105.

time; tribal leaders were reluctant to volunteer their sons for fear that they would be stationed in other areas of Iraq. Abu Risha framed this concern in the context of the ongoing sectarian violence that appeared to go unaddressed by the government. In light of this reciprocal apprehension, General Petraeus persuaded the Iraqi Minister of Defense to guarantee new recruits would be stationed somewhere in al-Anbar for at least two years. After this agreement was made, recruitment numbers shot up.[89]

Although at face value the agreement struck between General Petraeus and the Minister of Defense was positive, it almost certainly hindered the development of the Iraqi army as a nonsectarian organization. By allowing fears of sectarian attacks, however justified, to effect the structure of the Iraqi army, the U.S. fostered lingering sectarian suspicions between Iraq's Sunni and Shia communities. As we will see, over the next few years the Iraqi army and the Sons of Iraq were especially successful in regaining territory that had been lost to al-Qaeda in Iraq, but the existence of the Awakening militias depended on the presence of the U.S. military that cooperated and coordinated with them.

Stephen Hadley, the U.S. National Security Advisor in 2006, wrote a memo which validated Sunni concerns that al-Maliki was attempting to shut them out of the government and consolidate Shia power.[90] The U.S. had the power at this point to force cooperation between Sunni and Shia Iraqis in the military but chose to keep them separate, which only fed into the suspicions they held about one another. It was these unabated suspicions that led to the eventual disbandment of the Sons of Iraq and al-Maliki's refusal to make members of the Awakening militias permanent members of the Iraqi army.

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[89] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 99-106.
[90] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 60.

The advent of the Sons of Iraq came on the heels of another major U.S. accomplishment in June of 2006: the assassination of AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He was immediately succeeded by Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, and in October of 2006 the Mujahideen Shura Council announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI,) to be led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.[91] As had been the case with the founding of the Mujahideen Shura Council, the renaming of the organization and the selection of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its leader was a further attempt to make the organization seem like part of a homegrown, Iraqi Islamic resistance movement.[92]

The assassination of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi combined with increased pressure on ISI coming from the Sons of Iraq crippled the organization substantially, and it entered a relatively stagnant period that lasted for about five years[93]. At this point it may appear that despite initial setbacks the U.S. recovered and managed to expel the Islamic State from Iraq before packing up and returning home. However, al-Zarqawi's group would return with a vengeance in the years that followed the U.S. withdrawal, due in large part to the unstable government that the U.S. left behind. Not only that, but the sectarian divide that American forces fostered even while successfully beating back ISI continued to effect Iraqi society long after the last American troops left Iraq. As it had at the outset of the 2003 invasion, ISI would go on to exploit this divide to gain support and expand into Iraq for the second time.

2007: Sons of Iraq Expand

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[91] Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror,* 26.; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 93.
[92] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 62, 119.
[93] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 8.

Throughout 2007 the Awakening movement continued to flourish, even after the assassination of Abu Risha at the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq in September. Unsurprisingly, the ISI's influence began to wane as a result. What is particularly notable about this year, though, is that U.S. forces began separating Sunni and Shia Iraqis in a more tangible way than stationing them in separate locations through the army. One strategy that developed was to build concrete walls that literally divided the Iraqi populations[94]; while these strategies reduced sectarian violence, they nursed preexisting divisions at a time when unity was critical. A May report by U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker noted the same concerns about the Iraqi Prime Minister that Stephen Hadley had voiced a year earlier. There was evidence that al-Maliki was attempting to reshape the Iraqi security forces to put more power in the hands of a small number of Shia Islamists.[95] Despite this information, U.S. armed forces made no effort to bridge the divide between Sunni and Shia Iraqis, and in fact promoted further separation.

2008: ISI Regroups

The increasing success of the Awakening militias in Iraq forced ISI to fall back and seek refuge, as they had been severely impaired by 2008.[96] ISI retreated from Iraqi cities to areas around the Syrian border. The most significant U.S. policy development in 2008 was the signing of a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that would provide legal backing to extend the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq from Jan 1, 2009 to December 31, 2011. Additionally, the new agreement required that authority over the Sons of Iraq be transferred to the Iraqi government. Many members of the Awakening militias were skeptical of this decision, certain that the Prime

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[94] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 73.
[95] "Maliki Reshapes the National Security System." Cable: 07BAGHDAD1593_a. Accessed November 06, 2016. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BAGHDAD1593_a.html.
[96] Cottam and Huseby, *Confronting al-Qaeda*, 1.

Minister would turn on them.[97] Concerning the Sunni-Shia relationship, U.S. forces continued to

act merely as a stop-gap on sectarian violence by late 2008 rather than seeking to ameliorate the

division.[98]

        At this point, it is necessary to say a few words about the developing sectarian conflicts

in Syria, as ISI eventually exploited these as it had in Iraq. In 2008, the Syrian government

began an assault on Sunni Islam by conducting activities such as dismissing government

employees for wearing the niqab. Additionally, the *mukhabarat*, intelligence service, began to

reassert its control over mosque activities and religious studies. At this point, the U.S. had a

dismal diplomatic relationship with Syria, as it was known that the al-Assad regime had aided

the transfer of foreign jihadists from Syria into Iraq in support of the insurgency.[99]

2009: SOFA Destroys the Sons of Iraq

        In accordance with the new Status of Forces Agreement, al-Maliki assumed control over

the Awakening militias, Camp Bucca[100] was closed and it's prisoners were transferred into Iraqi

custody, and all security responsibilities fell to the Iraqi government. As many had feared, by

Summer 2009 people affiliated with the Awakening became a target of the government. In many

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[97] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 98-106.; Parker, Ned. "Sunni Leader Hero to U.S., Outlaw in Iraq." July 05, 2008. Accessed November 06, 2016. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-07-05/news/0807040300_1_sunni-fighters-tahseen-sheikhly-shiite-dominated-government.
[98] Karon, Tony. "Iraq's Government, Not Obama, Called Time on the U.S. Troop Presence" Time Magazine. October 21, 2011. Accessed November 04, 2016. http://world.time.com/2011/10/21/iraq-not-obama-called-time-on-the-u-s-troop-presence/.; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 87-90.
[99] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 29-35.
[100] Camp Bucca was a notorious U.S. prison in Iraq, sometimes referred to as "the academy," because of the extent to which Salafi-jihadi ideology spread among the detainees. Additionally, valuable connections were made between jihadists, who then sought out one another upon release. See TIA, 75 for further information about Camp Bucca.

cases, Sunni fighters were arrested and imprisoned on little to no evidence while many Shia

prisoners that had been detained at Camp Bucca were released.[101]

2010: ISI Gets a New Leader

U.S. policy in Iraq had remained steady since the inception of the Sons of Iraq in 2006,

and 2010 saw a continuation of those policies despite the gradual demise of the movement that

had so successfully degraded the Islamic State of Iraq. The U.S. continued to conduct military

operations in Iraq and subdue sectarian violence as much as possible while gradually

withdrawing its troops.

In a U.S. raid conducted on April 18 Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed, succeeded by

Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, known today as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[102] He

had founded an insurgent group named *Jamaat Jaish Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaa* soon after the

U.S. invasion of Iraq began. From February to December of 2004 he was detained at Camp

Bucca, and in 2007 he joined the Mujahideen Shura Council.[103] When he assumed leadership of

the Islamic State of Iraq the organization was in disarray and he set out to rebuild it from the

ground up.[104] Many of al-Baghdadi's new recruits were his fellow detainees at Camp Bucca,

including at least eight members of its senior leadership.[105]

Regarding developments in Syria, in December 2010 Robert Ford became the first U.S.

Ambassador to Syria since 2005. This appointment not only reflected the willingness of the U.S.

to address deteriorating conditions in Syria, but also President al-Assad's desire to cooperate

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[101] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 87-90.; Gordon, Michael R., and Bernard E. Trainor. *The endgame: The inside story of the struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama.* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), 590-591.
[102] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 93.; Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror*, 33.
[103] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 21, 119-131.
[104] Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror*, 37.
[105] Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State." The Soufan Group. November 2014. 20. Accessed November 04, 2016. http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf

with the U.S. on security matters now that it was incapable of exporting native insurgents to neighboring Iraq.[106]

2011: U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq and The Expansion of ISI

The most consequential decision made about Iraq in 2011 was the decision not to extend the Status of Forces Agreement again, as President Bush had done in 2008. Days before the agreement expired, al-Maliki began pressing charges against prominent Sunni figures, including his own vice president, Tariq Hashimi. David Petraeus noted in a 2014 interview that this event initiated the unraveling of the work that the U.S. had done to bring Iraqi society together over the last five years.[107] Actually, this was an unsurprising event when one considers the lack of any serious effort by the U.S. to bridge the sectarian divide in Iraq despite at least two senior officials noting the increasingly authoritarian behavior of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The American withdrawal amidst these conditions ensured that U.S. influence left Iraq alongside U.S. troops.

Petraeus also argued that an extension of SOFA was impossible, because it was clear that Prime Minister al-Maliki was unwilling to seek parliamentary approval for such an extension. Others disagree, such as Leon Panetta, U.S. Secretary of Defense at the time. He claims that although the U.S. had plenty of leverage, such as threatening to withhold reconstruction aid, the White House refused to get behind these proposals. The lack of advocacy from President Obama in the negotiations conducted between the Departments of State and Defense and the Iraqi Prime Minister left any proposal the U.S. offered dead on arrival.[108]

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[106] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 226.; Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 46.
[107] Boghani, "ISIS's Rise."
[108] Panetta, Leon, and Jim Newton. *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace*. (Westminster: Penguin, 2014), 392-394.

The efforts at convincing al-Maliki to retain a number of American forces began as early as April, with then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mike Mullen recommending that at least 16,000 American soldiers remain in Iraq after December. Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State at the time, also pushed for a substantial force to be left in Iraq, and contacted Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) to urge him to press al-Maliki for a decision, which he did at a meeting with the Iraqi Prime Minister in May. It became clear that a desire for U.S. troops existed among several top Iraqi officials, including Massoud Barzani, a prominent Kurdish leader, and Ayad Allawi, al-Maliki's main opponent. On May 19 President Obama agreed to leave a force of 10,000 in Iraq, but prohibited this information from being shared with al-Maliki before he explicitly requested that troops be left. Only then would official negotiations begin. [109]

On August 2, Iraqi leaders made this request, but the response from the White House was lukewarm, at best. President Obama began rethinking his commitment of 10,000 troops, and by August 13 that number had been walked back to 3,500. Negotiations then stalled, as per U.S. insistence that immunity for U.S. troops on Iraqi soil required a parliamentary vote, which was beyond al-Maliki's capabilities. Immunity for U.S. troops was a sticking point for the Obama administration, and when it became clear that this was impossible, negotiations fell through.[110] Though some argued that al-Maliki could have authorized the immunity agreement without parliamentary approval, the U.S. State Department insisted that it required parliamentary approval; thus, the U.S. offered al-Maliki a considerably reduced force size while requiring approval that was almost certainly an impossibility.[111]

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[109] Ferguson, *No End in Sight*, 653.669.
[110] Ibid., 670.
[111] Reiss, Mitchell B., and Peter Fever. "What Happened to Immunity for U.S. Troops in Iraq?" Foreign Policy. November 19, 2014. Accessed November 20, 2016. http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/19/what-happened-to-immunity-for-u-s-troops-in-iraq/.

Meanwhile, the Syrian Arab Spring had sprung. On March 6, a number of young boys were arrested in the city of Deraa; they were detained, beaten, and allegedly tortured for writing what had become somewhat of a slogan for the Arab Spring in their graffiti.[112] After this event, random and planned protests spread throughout the country, such as those in Homs and Aleppo on March 25. Additionally, local militias, known as the Free Syrian Army, began cropping up in response to President Bashar al-Assad's security campaign throughout the spring and summer of 2011.

In early July there was an attack on the U.S. embassy in Syria in response to the unsanctioned and unplanned appearance of Ambassador Ford at a protest against the government in Hama. Prior to this event, President Obama had remained silent on the developing situation in Syria, and only called for al-Assad's resignation five weeks after the assault on the U.S. embassy.[113] Even after this event, the U.S. did not intervene militarily in Syria, even in the form of a 'no-fly' zone, because they were suspicious that rebel groups may have ties to terrorist organizations.

The U.S. assessment was correct, many of these groups had either already been designated terrorist groups or would soon be. However, in light of its recent tangles in Iraq, the U.S. focused too heavily on the consequences of intervention while underestimating the consequences of non-intervention. In the later summer of 2011 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent a handful of operatives into Syria to set up an affiliate of ISI in Syria, known as *Jabhat al-Nusra*, the Victory Front, also known as the Nusra Front (NF.) The leader of this organization was Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, a native Syrian who had served as the regional leader of ISI in Mosul.[114]

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[112] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 12.; the slogan mentioned here is *"al-Shab yureed eskaat al-nizaam,"* "The People want to topple the regime."
[113] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 228-235.
[114] Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror*, 41.; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 16, 75.

As had occurred in Iraq when AQI first appeared on the scene, many recruits to JN were attracted to its substantial treasury, advanced weaponry, and organization.[115]

2012: U.S. Withholds Aid

The Nusra Front was officially announced in January 2012 and its ties to ISI were kept secret.[116] It rapidly became the leader among insurgent factions in Syria, partly because of its hidden identity and because al-Jolani continued to emphasize the war against al-Assad's regime.[117] Despite the presence of moderate FSA factions in Syria, the bulk of the successes of opposition groups were due to the critical role played by jihadi organizations such as the Nusra Front.[118] This made it all the more shocking to opposition groups when the U.S. designated JN a terrorist group in December[119]; in response, protests erupted in Syria among moderate opposition groups who viewed JN as their champion.

When the U.S. made this designation, existing negative perceptions of the United States worsened. The Americans had refused to arm moderate rebel groups since February due to concerns that not enough intelligence was available to differentiate between truly moderate groups and those with ties to terrorist organizations.[120] The Obama administration had refused to do more than request al-Assad's resignation even as conditions in Syria continued to deteriorate. These actions stirred up sentiment among Syrian rebels that the U.S. did not actually care whether or not al-Assad remained in power. This sentiment skyrocketed after the U.S.'s weak

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[115] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 177.
[116] Lister, Profiling the Islamic State, 2014, 12.
[117] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 59.; Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror*, 41.
[118] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 85.
[119] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 182.; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 182.; Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 5.
[120] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 65.

response to al-Assad's violation of the 'red line' that Obama had laid down for him in August of 2012.[121]

Furthermore, even when key members of the Obama administration decided that arming moderate factions was becoming necessary, the President refused to provide support beyond non-lethal aid. He held fast this decision despite attempts by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the CIA to persuade him to adopt a plan that would develop a vetted and trained force of moderate rebels with U.S. backing.[122] These actions mirrored those taken by the Bush administration in Iraq; the U.S. had refused to cooperate with tribal sheikhs against AQI in Iraq which allowed AQI to flourish. In Syria, the Obama administration was refusing any substantial aid to moderate insurgent factions, forcing them to turn to the ISI affiliate, JN.

2013: Establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

In March of 2003 a company of insurgents consisting of a small FSA faction, but predominantly JN operatives, captured the Syrian city of Raqqa while a second force captured the border town of al-Yaroubiya, forcing Syrian soldiers to retreat into Iraq's Ninawah province, an ISI stronghold. The Iraqi army held these soldiers for two days, when they drove them towards another border town in order to return to Syria. This convoy was attacked by ISI operatives, who had been tipped off by JN, marking the first time ISI was directly involved in Syrian affairs.[123]

Shortly after that event on April 9, al-Baghdadi announced the merger of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Nusra Front, revealing the true nature of their relationship.[124] However,

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[121] Rhodes and Stroble special report, 2014
[122] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 278-280.
[123] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 112-113.
[124] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 188.

immediately after the announcement al-Jolani denounced the merger, and swore allegiance to al-Qaeda Central, not ISI.[125] Thus, in the following months JN effectively split in two, with some members pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi and the newly formed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS,) and some remaining loyal to JN in Syria.[126] Even after this announcement, which signified a significant expansion of al-Baghdadi's organization, President Obama continued to insist that sending weapons to Syria would only worsen the situation. He maintained that U.S. policy would only change if al-Assad crossed the 'red line.'

That red line was crossed on August 2013 when evidence was provided that the Syrian government had used sarin gas against rebels and civilians in the Damascus suburb of East Ghouta, leaving 1,429 dead.[127] Except rather than responding with force, the U.S. made a deal with Russia, one of al-Assad's infamous backers, to ensure that Syria's chemical weapons would be destroyed. This reaction was viewed as a betrayal by Syrian rebel groups and only further convinced them that the U.S. did not support the revolution.[128] Despite this soft response, the U.S. did increase its aid to Syrian rebels in the following months.

September saw the shipment of arms by the CIA to various FSA groups for the first time, and in early October the training program in Jordan received a boost as well. However, FSA factions still depended largely on support from Islamist groups that were receiving substantial monetary aid from foreign backers such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Towards the end of 2013 the U.S. sought to ameliorate this issue by putting pressure on both countries to direct their aid through Western-backed Military Operations Centers in Turkey and in Jordan.[129]

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[125] Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror*, 42.
[126] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 135.
[127] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 293.; Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 163.; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 144.
[128] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 165.
[129] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 171-189.

Though these were positive measures taken by the U.S. to increase support for moderate FSA factions, they came two years too late. Moreover, they were indirect measures that took months to trickle down to the rebels, with the exception of the mediocre arms shipments. It is understandable to not want American weapons falling in to the hands of Islamist organizations, especially ISIS, but without increased aid the moderate forces were impotent unless they joined forces with such groups. They were stuck in a catch-22; working with Islamist groups ensured that the U.S. would withhold aid, but without those groups they were ineffective because of the limited amount of aid the U.S. actually sent.

U.S. policy towards Iraq at this time was virtually nonexistent; while ISIS was executing its "Breaking the Walls" campaign in the spring of 2013, the Iraqi Security Forces were forcefully subduing protests such as those in Hawija on April 23.[130] In response to increased violence against protesters in Iraq, tribal leaders once again banned together to form *al-Majlis al-Askari al-Amm li-Thuwar al-Iraq*, the General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries (GMCIR.) The council aimed the overthrow the al-Maliki regime.[131] Just as AQI had taken advantage of Sunni anti-American and anti-government discontent in the early 2000's, so did ISIS exploit this moment. Groups such as the GMCIR offered ISIS a second chance to reclaim territory in the rural areas from which it had been expelled during the Awakening.

The sectarian divides that plagued Iraqi society are directly descendant from the policies that the U.S. enacted during its invasion of Iraq in 2003. As it has been discussed at length previously, a brief recap will suffice. American forces implemented a de-Ba'athification policy in May 2003 that overwhelmingly dismissed Sunni Iraqis from government positions while filling those spaces with Shia Iraqis. As an insurgency developed, American forces continued to

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[130] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 96-97.
[131] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 41.

reject proposals of cooperation from tribal leaders which promoted the belief that the U.S. was working with the Shia government to oppress the Sunni population. Lastly, the U.S. ignored al-Maliki's increasingly domineering behavior in the months leading up to the final withdrawal of troops. These decisions left unmistakable scars on the Iraqi populace that culminated in the protests against the government that began in late 2012, and ultimately caused Iraq's Sunnis to once again look to ISIS for support against the regime.

2014: U.S. Military Operations Expand

The most remarkable successes of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria occurred in 2014. By January 4 ISIS militants had captured the Iraqi city of Fallujah, where they drew support from several Sunni tribes, including the Naqshabandi Order.[132] Six months later, ISIS launched an assault on Mosul that continued for four days until it retained control over the entire city; in the following days the militants pushed further south, capturing the towns of Zab, Hawija, Riyahd, and Rashad, and eventually asserting control over Tikrit.[133] After this impressive military run, the group demolished the official border between Iraq and Syria, and spokesperson Abu Muhammed al-Adnani announced the reconstitution of the caliphate, establishing the Islamic State as we know it today.[134]

In spite of these remarkable advances, the U.S. did not shift course until IS threatened the lives of thousands of Yazidi Iraqis that were trapped atop Mount Sinjar in early August. In

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[132] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 298.; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 22.; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 66.; The Naqshabandi Order, also called the Naqshabandi Army is a group started by Saddam Hussein's former vice president General Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri. The group was founded in 2006 as an attempt to ressurct the Ba'athist movement in Iraq, and was made up of several former Ba'athist members of Saddam's regime. It was accused of having connections to the terrorist group Ansar al-Islam, but al-Douri evaded arrest and continued to establish relationships with other groups in Sunni dominated areas such as Tikrit and Mosul. The Naqshabandi Order is known to have associated with AQI and then ISIS in these areas as recently as 2014.

[133] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 231-232.

[134] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 1.; Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror*, 46.; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 42.

response, President Obama announced a military operation in Iraq consisting of targeted

airstrikes against IS and a humanitarian operation in support of the Yazidis.[135] A month later, yet

another policy was adopted by the U.S.: attacking ISIS militants wherever they reside, whether

in Syria or Iraq. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry also met with leaders of numerous Arab

states and Turkey to discuss a multinational campaign against IS, which were lucrative.[136]

It seems that all it took to convince the United States to commit seriously to defeating IS

was the threatened genocide of thousands of innocent Iraqis. Additionally, the U.S. seemed

finally to have grasped the damage being done by Nouri al-Maliki in terms of fueling the

sectarian environment that provided fertile ground for IS to develop, because on September 8 he

resigned under pressure by both the U.S. and Iran. Despite the fact that his successor, Haider al-

Abadi, was considered an improvement, many Sunni Iraqi's agreed that the damage had already

been done.[137]

In Syria, the U.S. showed a similar commitment to eradicating IS, as on April 1 highly

advanced American weaponry emerged in Idlib. This shipment had arrived through the U.S.-

backed Military Operations Center in Turkey, thus it was the fruit of U.S. efforts to pressure

Saudi Arabia and Oman to support moderate FSA factions that had begun 2013.[138] The first U.S.

airstrike in Syria occurred on September 22 and targeted JN targets as well as IS targets. The

bombing of JN locations was still not popular among rebel factions, as they believed it proved

U.S. intent to undermine the revolution. As such, the airstrikes drew condemnations from at

least ten groups that were openly backed by the United States.[139] U.S. military operations

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[135] Stern and Berger, *The State of Terror*, 47.; Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 252.
[136] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 284.
[137] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 236.
[138] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 217-218.
[139] Ibid., 292.

continued in that manner for the remainder of the year, and in fact have not been expanded

significantly to this day.

2015: Same Old, Same Old

On a diplomatic visit from Jordan's Kind Abdullah II in February, he pleaded with the

Obama administration for increased support fighting IS, claiming that there was much more the

U.S. could do to be supportive, including resupplying the stocks that had been offered.[140]

Although weapons shipments were not escalated, the U.S. became more lenient in the ways that

it allowed its weapons to be used. For example, on April 22 Western-backed FSA factions,

supplied with American weaponry, performed 3 simultaneous attacks alongside an Islamist

group that had formed in Idlib. This marked the first time that the use of U.S. weapons was

permitted in a cooperative attack with Islamist groups; after this victory, FSA groups were

advised to increase cooperation with such groups.

In May IS seized control of the cities of Ramadi, Iraq and Palmyra, Syria. Reacting to

this as well as the uptick in IS attacks since early Spring, the United States executed its first air

raids in support of opposition forces in Aleppo on June 6.[141] A month later, the train and equip

missions that Secretary John Kerry had promised FSA groups in 2014 began; these troops were

pathetically unprepared as was apparent when the first group was overrun by JN militants in less

than a day.[142] By the end of 2015, President Obama had authorized the deployment of additional

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[140] Warrick, *Black Flags*, 9.; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 51.
[141] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 346-349.
[142] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 380.

Special Operations forces to Iraq and Syria but remained hesitant to commit ground troops to these countries.[143]

2016: Conclusions from the Present Day

At the time of writing, the Islamic State maintains control over two major strongholds: Mosul, Iraq and Raqqa, Syria. Both are targets of ongoing offensives led by the Iraqi government and moderate Syrian rebels, respectively. The United States is also providing support to these offensives in the form of airstrikes and military advising.[144] Despite President Obama's initial resistance to intervene in Syria or Iraq after completing U.S. withdrawal of troops from the latter, the past three years have seen an uptick in support for moderate Syrian rebel factions that seek to push back the Islamic State. In an interview with Vice News released in mid-March 2015, President Obama admitted that al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State's predecessor, grew out of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but insisted that a military defeat of IS would only temporarily incapacitate the group.[145]

In other words, what the U.S. should take away from its drawn out battle against the Islamic State's various reincarnations it is that no matter how effective military operations are, the group will continue to recover if the underlying conditions that allow its growth are not addressed. As long as Sunni Muslims continue to be disenfranchised politically they will have a reason to believe in the narrative that the Islamic State puts forth, and they will take up arms in

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[143] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 47-48.; Cooper, Helene. "U.S. Special Operations Force in Iraq to Grow, Pentagon Says." December 01, 2015. Accessed November 06, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/02/world/middleeast/us-increases-special-operations-forces-fighting-isis-in-iraq.html.
[144] "Anyone for Raqqa?" The Economist. November 12, 2016. Accessed November 04, 2016. http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21709967-there-less-offensive-islamic-states-capital-meets-eye-anyone.
[145] Shane Smith. "President Obama Speaks with VICE News." VICE News. March 17, 2015. Accessed November 13, 2016. https://news.vice.com/video/president-obama-speaks-with-vice-news.

order to correct this injustice. The United States should be familiar with this story by now, as it watched this process unfold twice in Iraq, up close in 2004 and from afar in 2012. Though the initial insurgency in Iraq was almost certainly an unintended consequence, the U.S. did little to ensure that the underlying issue that spawned it was corrected before pulling out completely in 2011.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq fortified al-Zarqawi's narrative that the West was conspiring with Shia Muslims to suppress the Sunni population. As a result of de-Ba'athification, over 500,000 Sunni Iraqis were left unemployed while simultaneously being stripped of protection by American forces who forced them to surrender their weapons. Adding insult to injury, the U.S. rejected multiple proposals for cooperation with the tribal communities even when it became clear that al-Qaeda in Iraq was capitalizing on Sunni discontent. Not only had the U.S. created conditions ripe for AQI to develop and spread in Iraq, but it refused to correct these conditions before withdrawing its troops.[146]

Without the benefit of hindsight, perhaps President Obama did not yet understand that a military defeat of AQI was not sufficient for its total demise, as he acknowledged in the 2015 interview. That being said, there were several senior officials who advocated for American troop presence in Iraq beyond 2011, which the President refused. In his words, "[He] said [he'd] end the war in Iraq. [He] ended it."[147] The decision to not leave troops was much more the result of a president determined to keep his campaign promise than it was a reflection of the state of the Iraqi government at the end of 2011.

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[146] Bruno, Greg. "A Costly Exit from Iraq." March 06, 2009. Accessed November 04, 2016. http://www.cfr.org/iraq/costly-exit-iraq/p18681.
[147] Lowry, Rich. "The War Obama Didn't End." August 12, 2014. Accessed November 13, 2016. http://nypost.com/2014/08/12/the-war-obama-didnt-end/.

Since 2006 government officials as well as Iraqis themselves had been warning the U.S. of the growing authoritarianism of Nouri al-Maliki, including assertions that he was allowing attacks against Sunni to continue unabated. Despite this, American forces allowed authority of the Sons of Iraq to be transferred to this government that quickly reneged on its promises to continue to pay these men or offer them permanent positions in the Iraqi military. Although the Sons of Iraq, in concert with Iraqi and American forces, had succeeded in expelling AQI from Iraq by 2010, decisions by the Iraqi government continued to ostracize its Sunni communities; thus, the environment within which AQI originally flourished endured despite its military defeat. The Americans left Iraq with full knowledge of these developing conditions, and in fact had devoted resources throughout the surge to separating Iraq's Shia and Sunni populations in light of the persistent sectarian tension. Days before the last American soldier left Iraq, senior officials watched as al-Maliki arrested his own vice president, and the American people were content that Obama had kept his campaign promise.

The benefit of hindsight is immense, and perhaps we can forgive Presidents Bush for not anticipating the development of al-Qaeda in Iraq while accepting that his policies led to its success. After all, he and President Obama committed to the surge that dislodged the group from its strongholds in Iraq by 2010. And perhaps we can forgive President Obama for incorrectly predicting that the Iraqi military was capable of preventing the resurgence of ISI in 2014 while accepting that he allowed sectarian division in Iraq to deepen while he withdrew American forces. However, the benefit of the doubt simply cannot be given to the U.S. government concerning the emergence of ISI in Syria in 2013.

As it had in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria capitalized on the sectarian divisions in Syria that fuelled its revolution. The story was a familiar one: disaffected Sunnis rebel

against an establishment seeking to suppress them. However, one important distinction should have compelled the U.S. to offer more support, more quickly. Though Iraqi Sunnis remained resentful of the government throughout the U.S. occupation of Iraq, both the government and the Sunni communities were united in their mission to expel AQI, which allowed for the stunning successes of the Sahwa militias. In Syria a much more complicated web of resistance developed.

When the Syrian Arab Spring began, Syrian rebels were fighting against their government for much the same reasons that Iraqi Sunnis fought al-Maliki. However, when ISIS began to exploit their revolution, the Syrian government was not nearly as committed to cooperating with the rebel groups as it was to ensuring that it remained in power. Moderate rebel groups initially joined forces with the Islamic state, as they had in Iraq, in order to defeat al-Assad, but when rebel groups began to turn against the Islamic State, again mimicking the process in Iraq, they encountered no support from the Syrian government. Although in Iraq President Obama had reason to believe that the Iraqi government would cooperate with tribal communities to keep IS out of the country, there was precisely no evidence to suggest the same cooperation could be expected in Syria.

Moreover, there was reason to believe that Bashar al-Assad would carry out policies to bolster the Islamic State, as it was fighting the rebel groups that sought to remove him from power. The U.S. was aware that al-Assad had been compliant in AQI operations that funneled foreign jihadists into Iraq during the U.S. invasion and occupation. Furthermore, it was cognizant of the Syrian president's desire to remain in power at all costs, as evidenced by continued attacks on moderate rebel factions by the Syrian military, including the use of

chemical weapons against protestors in August 2013 as well as airstrikes carried out by Russia, al-Assad's primary supporter.[148]

Given these circumstances, there was little, if any, reason to believe that the Syrian government would conduct effective military operations against the Islamic State; rather, al-Assad reinforced its positions in Syria while the U.S. watched, refusing to send anything but non-lethal aid to a small number of moderate rebel factions. This inaction by the United States allowed the alliance between IS and the Syrian government to effectively diminish what little power moderate factions had to begin with. It was not until late 2013 that President Obama authorized weapons shipments to Syrian rebels, and it would be two years before those weapons were sanctioned for use in operations conducted with Islamist rebel factions against IS. Thus, even once the U.S. decided that it had a responsibility to help defeat IS, an organization which it inadvertently helped spawn a decade earlier, the aid it sent was limited, restricted, and insufficient, as evidence by Jordan's King Abdullah II's plea for additional support in early 2015.

Today, although weakened by U.S. airstrikes in support of Syrian rebel operations, the Islamic State remains a force to be reckoned with, with strongholds in at least two major cities of Iraq and Syria. I am not insisting that if the U.S. were to commit boots on the ground in Syria that IS would be obsolete. As Nada Bakos reminded us, the occupation of Iraq clearly shows that the United States lacks the agency to create a stable peace whenever and wherever it

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[148] Barnard, Anne. "Syria Rebels Say Russia Is Targeting Them Rather Than ISIS." September 30, 2015. Accessed November 06, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-say-russia-targets-them-rather-than-isis.html?_r=0 ; "Russian Warships Target Syria With Missiles." August 20, 2016. Accessed November 04, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/russian-warships-target-syria_us_57b865b1e4b0b51733a3c08c.; "Syria Conflict: Children's Hospital Hit in Deadly Aleppo Strikes." BBC News - Middle East. November 16, 2016. Accessed November 19, 2016. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37998751.

pleases.[149] However, there can be no doubt its policy towards Syria since the beginning of the revolution in 2011 hampered the ability of moderate rebel factions to push back against IS. The U.S. deprived these groups of essential aid despite its experience with al-Qaeda in Iraq that proved how ineffective small rebel factions were until combined with the highly trained and well-equipped American and Iraqi forces.

President Obama, while still refusing to commit troops to Iraq or Syria, has authorized additional Special Operations forces and expanded airstrikes to combat the expansion of IS. However, as was noted previously, the underlying conditions that allow the Islamic State to expand must be addressed in order to ensure its demise. In Iraq, many Sunnis agree that al-Maliki's successor, Haider al-Abadi, is an improvement, but that IS already has a strong support base and foothold in Iraq.[150] Thus, the fight is primarily a military one against IS, as there is a belief that al-Abadi represents a positive change for the Sunni position in Iraq.

In Syria, however, this means serious political reform that puts an end to the suppression of Sunni voices; in other words, the replacement of Bashar al-Assad as president with someone more moderate and tolerant of the political opposition. Short of an invasion, which itself can result in disaster, as Iraq reminds us, sanctions against the Syrian government and providing military assistance are the primary ways by which to achieve this goal. President Obama has employed both of these measures in Syria, but Russian support for al-Assad keeps the government afloat while simultaneously preventing broader sanctions by the UN.[151]

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[149] Bakos, Nada. "Humility Now!" Foreign Policy. April 2, 2013. Accessed November 03, 2016. http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/02/humility-now/.
[150] Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, 236.
[151] "German Official Calls for U.N. Sanctions against Syria." August 31, 2016. Accessed November 06, 2016. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-germany-idUSKCN1173H9.

Moving forward, U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's transition team has been in contact with the Russian government about the situation in Syria.[152] Trump has continually expressed his desire for improved relations between the U.S. and Russia and his commitment to defeating the Islamic State. As Russia is bent on keeping Bashar al-Assad in power, it seems unlikely that a Trump presidency will result in the fall of the al-Assad government if relations between the U.S. and Russia are to improve. Necessarily, a U.S. commitment to treating the underlying issue of IS's success in Syria means acting against Russian interests in the country. Hopefully President-elect Trump will realize, as President Obama has emphasized, that the success of the Islamic State relies upon the discontentment of Syria's Sunnis that is provoked by Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Hopefully he will choose to fight for the interests of these people rather than the interests of Vladimir Putin. Hopefully he will not continue to foster the conditions that allow the Islamic State to expand, as previous U.S. presidents have. Hopefully.

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[152] Oliphant, Roland, and Josie Ensor. "Russia 'in Contact' with Donald Trump's Team over Syria." The Telegraph. November 17, 2016. Accessed November 18, 2016. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/17/russia-in-contact-with-donald-trumps-team-over-syria/.

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