Islamic State
Rough Violence

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Extraordinary times: Extraordinary events in Iraq (and in the Muslim World). The lightening seizure of 'Sunni territory' spanning Syria and Iraq (but imagined as the realisation of a Sunni 'belt' extending across the region); with all its potent symbolism in the context of the early history of Islam; with its forging of a completely new 'Sunni geography'; and with the cold ruthlessness of its military strategy, has dazzled and stimulated the ardour of young Sunni Muslims everywhere.

It has forced the admiration of many in Iraq and the Gulf States; yet it frightens too, the flesh creeps with the 'march of the beheaders'. It is this heady, adrenalin-laden mix of fear, mingling with the euphoric sense that events somehow are mirroring the very laying down of the Islamic Empire, which is seeding fertile ground. Across the Middle East and Africa, agrarian distress and the Salafist firing-up of a Sunni self-perception of victimhood, usurpation and grievance are making for a wide vulnerability to this new collective fervour for *Da'ish* (ISIS).

We have written before that *Da'ish* (ISIS) is *not* al-Qae'da; it is *not* an al-Qae'da franchise, nor is it its affiliate. After brief flirtation, it stands severed and in direct opposition to al-Qae'da, which it views as acting in error. (It still continues, however, to admire the writings of Abdallah Azzam.)

Al-Qae'da emerged from the 'myth' that the USSR was 'imploded' by the *mujahidin* of Afghanistan succeeding in forcing its political and economic overextension. It was Abdallah Azzam's analysis of the USSR's vulnerability to such a process,

which prompted the notion that the US could be similarly imploded — by 'shocking' it into a *global* overreach — an outcome which ultimately would expose the Superpower's frailties and hypocrisy to ordinary Muslims, and therefore cause them to lose their fear of it. For this objective to be achieved, however, Bin Laden saw a need for Muslims to be united (i.e. sectarianism was discouraged). At this point, the war of 'vexing and exhausting' was directed at the 'far enemy' through global acts of 'shock and awe', but al-Qae'da's was more a virtual war than a hot war fought on the ground.

Zarqawism (used here, loosely, to identify the ISIS ideology) grew from different roots: it was not a grandiose scheme to implode the USA – it was all about grievance (heavily grounded in the feelings of a displaced and impoverished rural class); it was about a sense of Sunni loss of privilege, power, possession of the state and claimed rights.   It was driven by a deep desire for revenge against 'usurpers'. It had, too, its overtones of a class war (countryside versus a cosmopolitan, affluent élite), but above all, it was deeply rooted in bigotry: a hatred of the 'other', and for the Shi'i and Iran in particular.

Zarqawism took root in Iraq. It took root in hot war (local 'blood politics' as it were, and not in Bin Ladenesque global paradigms) – and in the context of bitter sectarian struggle (Baghdad was being ethically cleansed) and in the humiliation of the *Sunnah* (ousted from power and summarily dismissed from the army). Subsequently, Sunnis from Syria fighting the occupation of Iraq (most of the Syrian and Palestinian fighters had gravitated to Zarqarwi's groups) carried the Zarqawi 'idea' back to the already resentful and aggrieved hinterland of Homs and Hamma.

What most characterised the Zarqawi doctrine was the absorption of an intolerant Wahhabism that demanded the purging – by the blade of a sword – of a 'defiled' Islam. It was to be 'purified' down to a single voice, a unique authority, and a single leadership for Islam. Through such purification, and in pursuing a course of deliberate ruthlessness, Shariah and the Islamic State would be re-constructed.

What sets Zarqawi apart from al-Qae'da are two elements: firstly, a radical refusal to accept conventional historical readings about how the Islamic state was formed. In this historical revisionism, it was the 'fighting-scholars' and their armed followers, fighting on behalf of Islam, who founded the State (this is NOT the conventional reading). Thus, whilst Zarqawism adopts Wahhabi 'puritanism', it breaks with it in a truly revolutionary way by denying the Saudi Kingdom any legitimacy as founders of a State, as the head of the Mosque, or as interpreter of the

Qur'an.   All these attributes ISIS takes for itself; it being (in its view) itself *the State*.   This constitutes a complete refutation of all aspects of Sunni temporal and religious authority.

Although Zarqawism follows Azzam in regarding the implosion of the US as a major aim, in practice ISIS filters its understanding of contemporary politics through the prism of the Prophet's migration from Mecca, his struggle with the Meccans, and through ISIS' reading of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr's, mode of violent warfare.   Symbolically, this is very important. Thus, when the Prophet's 'Muslim project' was nearly collapsed at the battle of *Uhud* by the forces of Mecca, today's reversals to the 'divine mission' of ISIS in Syria are seen as having symbolic equivalence — as today's '*Uhud*' – that is, ISIS' setback in Syria is interpreted by many as an existential setback to the Sunni project as a whole. But who, then, stands for the Meccans in this allegory?   It is not America; it is Iran. Lip service is paid to the 'far enemy', but the symbolism points unmistakably to the near enemy: Iran.

In Iraq today, it is clear that ISIS sees the path towards consolidating the Islamic State to have already passed through the first stage (vexation operations, dispersing the enemy's strength and over-extending its resources).   Here again, the question arises, to which 'enemy' does ISIS refer?   Well, ISIS does not say; but Gulf leaders make this abundantly clear when they tell westerners that if only Bashar Assad and Nouri al-Maliki were to be removed, all would be resolved, and peace would return to the Middle East (both of course being perceived as obstacles to regional Sunni hegemony).

So today, ISIS regards Iraq (and eastern Syria) to be in the second stage (the 'Management of Savagery') in the progress toward the consolidation of the Caliphate (the third stage). What does this mean; and what does it imply for the conduct of next period?

The term 'administration of savagery' in fact refers to that hiatus which occurs between the waning of one power and the consolidation of power of another.   What is being assumed here is that a certain chaos will pertain, and that the disputed territory will be ravaged by violence as power oscillates back and forth between the 'old' power and its incoming successor (the Islamic State).

In this period, ISIS, according to its literature, will have limited aims: achieving internal security and preserving it; fixing its frontiers; feeding the population; establishing Shariah and Islamic justice – and, most importantly, fixing the establishment of a 'fighting society', at all levels within the community. In this stage, security will require the elimination of

spies and 'deterring the hypocrites with proof and other means and forcing them to repress and conceal their hypocrisy, to hide their discouraged opinions, and to comply with those in authority, until their evil is put in check'.   In short, we might expect that this will comprise ISIS' aims for the coming period.   In other words, that any move on Baghdad, which *Da'ish* insists will come, is unlikely to be imminent, but will have to await until the area already seized is 'secured', and its frontiers controlled.

This phase also marks 'plundering the financial resources' for the purposes of the 'project'.   The implication here is that ISIS has as its aim eventually to become financially self-sufficient. Indeed, it clearly has been pursuing this objective in Syria (taking oil fields, seizing the arms warehouses of the Syrian National Council, and selling to Turks much of the industrial infrastructure of Aleppo and northern Syria). This also suggests that, whilst ISIS is not presently contesting militarily the Peshmerga takeover in Kirkuk (with its substantial oil resources), it is only a matter of time before *Da'ish* seeks to acquire such an obvious source of funding – just as it has fought other jihadist groups in Syria for control of Raqa'a's oil revenue.

But this second phase (administering the violent hiatus until the State is consolidated) — more ominously — signals the start of 'massacring the enemy and making him frightened'.   The literature underlines that anyone who has actually experienced conflict (in contrast to those who simply theorise about it) understands that slaughter and striking fear into the hearts of the enemy is in the nature of war.   The point is made by noticing that the Companions (of the Prophet) 'burned (people) with fire, even though it is odious, because they knew the effect of rough violence in times of need'. The author of the *Management of Savagery* treatise bluntly states that there is no room for 'softness'.   'Softness' is the ingredient for failure: 'our enemies will not be merciful to us, so it compels us to make them think one thousand times, before they dare attack us'.

It is here that we see the second key Zarqawist notion: the reading given by ISIS to the military campaigns conducted by first Caliph.   This 'reading' highlights (and seeks to legitimise) the need to use 'rough violence' during this period of hiatus, when Islamic power was not yet fully consolidated.   It was a moment, following the death of the Prophet, that several Arab tribes refused to pay *Zakat* to Abu Bakr (as they had earlier to the Prophet when he was alive), and held (in accordance with the prevailing Arab tradition) that their tribal allegiance to the Prophet naturally expired with the leader's death. There followed the brutal Wars of the *Ridda* (or the Wars of Apostasy).

Here the author quotes concerning Abu Bakr, the first Caliph that, understanding the need for severity: (Dirar b. al-Azwar said of Abu Bakr):

> 'I saw no one other than the Messenger of God who was more filled with the ruthlessness of war than Abu Bakr. We once informed him of evil news about the apostasy and its magnitude, and it was as if what we had told him did not bother him at all. *His orders for the army dealt only with the matter of severing the neck without clemency or slowness*.' (emphasis added.)

What is significant here, too, is the narrow construction placed on apostasy – a definition to which *Da'ish* adheres closely.

In sum, *the violence, the beheadings practised by ISIS, are not some whimsical, crazed fanaticism, but a very deliberate, considered strategy*. The military strategy pursued by ISIS in Iraq, too, is neither spontaneous nor some populist adventure, but rather reflects very professional, well-prepared military planning. The seemingly random violence has a precise purpose. It's aim is to strike huge fear; to break the psychology of a people – and, according to reports, this is exactly what *Da'ish* has already succeeded in doing for many of the residents of Baghdad. They are understandably very frightened.

For now, ISIS is focused on adding to the pressures on the city's population by seeking to seize its sources of fuel (the Baiji refinery) and its water supply (the Haditha Dam). *Da'ish's* explicit purpose — here with Baghdad as it has been in Syria — is to polarise the population:

> 'By polarisation here, [the author writes], I mean dragging the masses into the battle such that polarisation is created between all of the people. Thus, one group of them will go to the side of the people of truth, another group will go to the side of the people of falsehood, and a third group will remain neutral — awaiting the outcome of the battle in order to join the victor. We must attract the sympathy of this latter group, and make it hope for the victory of the people of faith, especially since this group has a decisive role in the later stages of the present battle. Dragging the masses into the battle requires more actions which will inflame opposition and which will make the people enter into the battle, willing or unwilling, such that each individual will go to the side which he supports. We must make this battle very violent, such that death is a heartbeat away, so that the two groups will realize that entering this battle will frequently lead to death. That will be a powerful motive for the individual to choose to fight in the ranks of the people of truth in order to die well, which is better than dying for falsehood and losing both this world and the next.'

This is the likely strategy facing the government of Iraq. Nouri al-Malaki is busy assembling and preparing a vast Shi'i army. Most likely he

initially will concentrate on halting ISIS' momentum, and, by delivering a sharp military defeat, will hope to break *Da'ish's* magic spell for the many Sunnis who have been dazzled by its bold advance across Iraq. Perhaps he will seek to re-take Takrit, leaving the much more difficult task of digging them out from Mosul to a later time. (Those who remember the siege of *Naher al-Barad* Camp in northern Lebanon will recall that it took the Lebanese army three and a half months – at the loss of more than three hundred men – to clear this Palestinian refugee camp from no more than a hundred-odd ISIS-type jihadists. *Naher al-Barad* was utterly destroyed in the process).

The success (or failure) of al-Maliki's defence – as for *Da'ish* – will pivot around the issue of polarisation. Too much force, too many civilian casualties, too much heavy weaponry will polarise the Sunni population to *Da'ish's* advantage; but *too little* may risk adding to ISIS's inflated reputation. There is also a real risk of this conflict metamorphosing into a polarised Sunni-Shi'a conflict — an outcome that Iran will be urging al-Maliki to avoid. A first priority will be to protect the Shi'i shrines. Iran does not wish to get directly involved in the fighting (and does not see a need, at this stage, so to do), but rather will seek to continue to provide Iraq with discreet support and advice.

With customary chutzpah, the mainstream liberal interventionist media are promoting a facile narrative that suggests the Iraqi Shi'i militias' defensive mobilisation to be essentially no different to the actions of ISIS (wilfully ignoring the fundamental differences that exist). The adoption of this narrative reflects both just how deeply the Sunni discourse of dispossession and victimhood has been uncritically absorbed by the West and come to be viewed as giving legitimacy to *takfiri jihadism*; and it reflects how little the dangers which ISIS represents are well understood.

ISIS has declared war in Lebanon. Its successes (unless quickly halted) will inspire youth across the Muslim world ('attracting youth by qualitative operations' as the ISIS discourse attests). The ground has been well prepared by the outpourings of 24-hour Salafist television and radio broadcasts, and increasingly important social media PR campaigns, beamed throughout the Middle East and into an increasingly receptive Africa. Much hangs on the outcome of events in Iraq.