

## **The Origins of the Islamic State**

**An Interview with Loulouwa AL RACHID and Matthieu REY**

Marieke LOUIS

**The Islamic State (IS) was not born miraculously in the summer of 2014. Its origins lie in the intertwined histories of Iraq and Syria over the past twenty years. Loulouwa Al Rachid and Matthieu Rey untangle IS's complex heritage, bequeathed to it both by Baathist authoritarianism and the United States' intervention in Iraq.**

***Books and Ideas:* Why is it necessary to consider the history of Syrian and Iraq over the past twenty years to understand the Islamic State (IS)?**

**Loulouwa Al Rachid:** When we speak of IS, we like to pretend that it was born miraculously, as if this self-proclaimed “state” suddenly appeared in the summer of 2014 when it seized Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, and that several hundred combatants driving around in pick-up trucks is all you need to launch a powerful terrorist organization.

Yet IS is not the offspring of a miraculous birth, but rather of a pregnancy denial, the symptoms of which have been obvious in Iraq for some time. 2003 was, in this respect, a decisive turning-point: it established an Al-Qaeda-type jihadist matrix in the heart of the Levant. It was the United States’ invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent military occupation which led to the rise of jihadism among our Mediterranean neighbors.

Among the groups that immediately took up arms against the American military and its Iraqi auxiliaries was a “foreign” component that had spent time in Afghanistan and other jihadist locations, notably the Caucasus. Upon that matrix, a number of small, armed Iraqi groups grafted themselves, initially adopting a “nationalist” stance against the foreign occupier. These organizations, consisting of former members of Saddam Hussein’s regime, soon dissolved into the jihadist network, contribution to its professionalization and providing it with an additional motivation: hatred of Shiites. The American military believed that it had eliminated these jihadists between 2007 and 2009 by relying on local tribes that it armed and financed to pacify Iraq’s Sunni regions.

Yet after 2003, the jihadist organizations never truly disappeared: at times, they melted into a population that had little sympathy for the often discriminatory practices of the new Shiite central government; at others, the retreated to the desert and the mountainous areas of western and northern Iraq. In particular, they found refuge in Syria, taking advantage of a border area between the two countries that, since the 1990s, had become open and porous. Indeed, Saddam Hussein’s regime, which had been seriously weakened by international sanctions, allowed, with Syria’s help, a black market and other forms of illicit trading to emerge as a way of bypassing the embargo. After 2003, the jihadists turned this border area into an “integrated” region, in which people, ideas, and, of course, weapons were constantly circulating. They were helped in these efforts by the benign attitude adopted by Bashar al-

Assad's regime, which was intent on undermining the "democratic" transition in Iraq decreed by George Bush.

**Matthieu Rey:** The importance of the Syrian question as it relates to IS is linked to our immediate present and the way this issue has dominated French news coverage. At first, the Syrian question made little sense to most French people. When a majority of his population was mobilizing against Bashar al-Assad's regime and suffering from relentless repression, Syria had no significant impact on public debates. While the media ran enthusiastic headlines about the revolutionary and democratic experiments in Tunisia or Egypt, events in Syria were described as "complex."

The Syrian question really began to enter public consciousness in the fall of 2013 with the problem of individuals traveling from Europe to Syria, which became the new place to practice jihad—but a jihad that was different from the kind waged in Afghanistan. It was far more extensive and more "democratic": it was a "low cost" jihad, in material terms (traveling to Syria is relatively cheap) as well as spiritual ones (you don't have to be a learned Muslim to join). The media and politicians constructed a discourse of fear surrounding the departure of Europeans to Syria, where they would learn how to fight and could return to Europe to plan terrorist attacks. To this must be added the first migratory wave of refugees, which was presumed to include jihadists. The jihadist question was thus grafted onto the refugee crisis.

The third stage began in January 2015, with the attacks against Charlie Hebdo and particularly the hostages taken at the Hyper Cacher supermarket. During the hostage situation, Coulibaly explicitly referred to Syria. Finally, in November 2015, when IS claimed responsibility for the attacks in Paris' eleventh *arrondissement*, the connection between the Syrian question and events in France was confirmed, based on an interpretation focused on the Islamic Sate's activities.

We see the same phenomenon in November 2015: this time, IS immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks. We are witnessing a projection of the Syrian question onto French territory.

***Books and Ideas:*** What are some of the distinctive traits of the Syrian and Iraqi regime since the 1990s, particularly as they relate to religion and violence?

**Loulouwa Al Rachid:** Before 2003, the connections between Saddam Hussein and the jihadist network were trivial, if not non-existent, contrary to the allegations made by the United States to justify its invasion of Iraq. True, Saddam Hussein referred to jihad in the 1990s, but it was a patriotic and nationalistic jihad, not a religious one.

During this period, the regime's propaganda used and abused the word "jihad," which became synonymous with resistance and the struggle against imperialism. Yet it was not a struggle directed outward: it was a struggle that took place on Iraqi soil. Consider a seemingly benign example: the reconstruction of the electricity sector, which was destroyed by the air bombardments of the international coalition formed to liberate Kuwait. The regime presented this effort as an "electricity jihad" to prove to the Americans and their allies that Iraqis could, alone and with their own resources, rebuild their own infrastructure. The same thing happened with the reconstruction of airports: it was a "jihad" against the air embargo.

Thus in the context of the struggle against the devastating effects of international sanctions, “jihad” was not a religious term. Its use in Baathist discourse is nevertheless symptomatic of the ideological and material bankruptcy of a state that previously boasted of being secular and progressive. The international sanctions that deprived Iraq of its oil income (98% of its revenue came from exporting crude oil) resulted both in the deterioration of public institutions and mass impoverishment: they fully exposed the regime’s decline. Through a kind of slippage, the state gradually saw religion as the only symbolic resource still at its disposal to (re)legitimate itself in the eyes of a population that had been brutalized by relentless repression and successive wars since the 1980s.

This is why, in 1995, Saddam Hussein declared a “National Campaign for Faith.” It began when the words “God is Great” (*Allahu Akbar*) were added to the national flag. Little by little, the regime “Islamized” its discourse and practice. New mosques were built throughout the country. Baath party cadres were required to take courses in religious education. Prison inmates who learned the Quran were given shorter sentences, which provided some relief to a depleted prison system. And so on.

But most importantly, increasing leeway was given to religious figures, which allowed a wide array of Islamist activists—Sunnis as well as Shiites—to preach and extend their networks through Iraqi society. Because it now lacked the resources to be authoritarian, the regime viewed “Islamization from above” as a necessity, or, in other words, as a safety valve that could redirect social tension. Yet this turn to religion proved counterproductive: it fomented opposition and, in particular, resulted in a dangerous politicization of religious affiliation in a society increasingly polarized between its Sunni minority and Shiite majority. A point was reached in the 1990s when the regime had to turn against these “Islamized” sectors, be they Sunni or Shiite.

That said, I would say that even more important than this Islamization from above was the fact that the Iraqi people, in the 1990s, were forced to develop survival strategies (black markets, an informal economy, and so on) and learn to “get by” on their own by disregarding the borders and regulations of a fossilized authoritarian state. The national territory became a space where violence and plunder were commonplace, and where the state was no longer able to play its customary role of providing security and regulating the economy and society. Iraqis had no choice but to leave the country or to fall back on the lowest common denominator: one’s neighborhood, region, tribe, or ethnic or religious group. This was fertile terrain for increasingly autonomous organizations that could simultaneously mobilize religious and tribal resources as strategies for survival and power. At present, IS is one example among many of such organizations.

**Matthieu Rey:** Unlike Iraq, Syria, in the 1990s, had a system in which authoritarianism seemed stable and rigid: President Hafez al-Assad had managed to liquidate all forms of opposition in the 1980s and looked like he would live up to his title of “eternal president” (*al-raïs al-khalid*). The structure was organized around a leader who arbitrated between competing political police units, thus preventing any one of them from plotting a coup. As in Iraq during the 1990-1991 intifada, it was really the intelligence services (*mukhabarat*) that guaranteed the regime’s stability. Of particular importance were services tied to the military and the police—in other words, organizations of repression and coercion—rather than the party. The Syrian regime was of the kind that fosters “institutional paranoia,” which sees its own society as a threat, and which, to control it, is willing to engage in high levels of violence.

As for relationships between the authorities and terrorist groups, the Iraqi and Syrian governments have long engaged in them. Their approach is pretty straightforward: they organize the activities of groups they can control, using them to hurt neighboring or Western countries they oppose.

Their peoples have absorbed the idea that the regime has a long-lasting memory and that it will diffuse repression through time/ and that repression will be diffused through time”: when the regime repressed the Hama revolt in 1982, reprisals continued through the 1980s and 1990s in many different forms. There was political repression, but also economic exclusion. It is crucial to understand that, at present, Syrian young people and citizens understand that the government controls the future, meaning that repression will continue until the authorities have arrested everyone who at one time or another was involved in the opposition. Syrian society expects repression to last for ten, twenty, or thirty years.

Furthermore, just as the importance of religion and Sunni-Shiite affiliation in Iraq has been exaggerated, the Alawite character of the Syrian regime has been exacerbated by the fact that the regime’s police militias are recruited from circles belonging to the immediate entourage of President Assad and other key regime figures. But this has more to do with the way these groups have been drawn into the regime; it is an optical illusion rather than a genuinely religious dynamic. As in Iraq with the Sunnis, it appears from the outside that the Alawites are in charge when in fact only certain segments of this community have risen to the top. Syria can thus not be described as a religious state.

The other characteristic of this regime is the lack of an efficient tax system and, as in Iraq, recourse to plunder as a form of remuneration. But unlike Iraq, Syria can deploy this strategy via a wide array of illicit trade networks in Lebanon, where it was “invited” in 1976, during the civil war. Every Syrian was able to find a way to make money, consistent with his or her rank, off this country and the myriad contraband activities that blossomed there at the time. In particular, it was along the Syrian-Lebanese border that Shabiha, the organization in charge of the hashish trade, began to develop. These were the regime strongmen who crushed dissent in 2011.

The other factor contributing to the regime’s perpetuation in the 1990s was international in nature. Syria returned to the forefront of international affairs thanks to the first Iraq war in 1990-1991. It joined the international coalition, denouncing Saddam Hussein’s regime for breaking Arab unity by invading Kuwait. It gave the United States cover (without, however, sending any troops); in return, the Americans recognized the importance of Syria’s role. Syria became the country that could settle three problems simultaneously: the Lebanese civil war; the legitimacy of Western intervention in Iraq, which saw Syria, a Baathist regime, as a major ally; and Arab-Israeli peace.<sup>1</sup>

### **The 1991 Iraqi Intifada and the Politicization of Religious Identities**

The 1991 *intifada* (“insurrection”) was a key moment in the politicization of religious identities and the polarization of the Shiite and Sunni communities. It broke out in the chaos of the Iraqi military’s retreat, as it fled Kuwait under the wall of fire inflicted by the American-led

---

<sup>1</sup> Due to its role in Lebanon, Syria was presumed to be capable of bring an end to hostilities between Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, thus reducing the Arab military threat for Israel to Jordan.

international coalition. Angry soldiers turned their weapons against the regime and were joined by part of the population. The intifada began in Shiite cities in Southern Iraq that have been heavily hit by bombings—first Basra, then Baghdad—which is exactly what happened in Syria in 2011. The insurgents then made contact with the coalition and asked the Western countries to supply them with weapons and impose an air embargo so that they could overthrow the regime on their own. But this request clashed with the coalition’s refusal to intervene for the purpose of toppling, even indirectly, Saddam Hussein’s regime, which managed to crush the uprising by presenting it as a plot hatched by Iran and Shiite Iraqis.

The 1991 intifada deeply divided Iraqi society, exacerbating tensions between the Shiites, a demographic majority that is dominated politically, and the Sunnis, who are a demographic minority that is politically dominant and tied to Saddam Hussein’s regime, just as Bashar al-Assad is often described today as embodying a regime that relies on the Alawite minority, as if Sunnis and Christians did not support the regime. And this myth of a self-sufficient minority regime is perpetuated from inside as well as outside, giving religious identity a political tenor that is completely at odds with the reality of Iraqi and Syrian social interactions.

**Loulouwa Al Rachid:** After 2003, a new political regime was established that had been shaped outside the country—by the United States and their Iraqi allies, opponents of Saddam Hussein opponents who now returned from exile. As the occupying power, with every prerogative and responsibility in its hands, including the return to order and the implementation of a democratic transition, the United States made one mistake after another. “Debaathification,” which consisted in eradicating Baath Party members from the civil service, politics, and the military, was an extremely harsh policy that excluded the old personnel of Saddam Hussein’s regime from the new institutions. Largely for ideological reasons, the American authorities deprived themselves of the entire administrative infrastructure that the former regime had used to govern the country. Just to be clear: even if the regime was already deteriorating, debaathification intensified this process by depriving the country of its most competent cadres.

The other mistake made by the Bush administration at this time was disbanding the Iraqi military: between 400,000 and 500,000 soldiers were sent home. Yet one of the characteristics of militaries in authoritarian regimes is the inflation in upper officer ranks, which are handed out to coopt military personnel and ensure their loyalty. In 2003, the Iraqi military included some 10,000 generals, whereas the American military has only a thousand. These generals who were had been sent home and found themselves, from one day to the next, dispossessed and deprived of all their resources (salary, pension, and social prestige) chose to join the armed insurrection. To replace them, the American administration turned to another “category” that is overrepresented in authoritarian regimes: exiles. Exiles are those who, after each coup and regime change, flee the country while exploiting the hospitality of regimes that are hostile to those in charge of their homeland. In the case of Iraq, Syria was, notably, the country to which a number of opponents fled.

In the 1980s, Iran was also a haven for these exiles, notably Islamist Shiites who were victims of the Baath repression and were “reintroduced” into Iraq after 2003. Some of these former exiles, like Hadi Al-Amiri, are now leading much of the struggle against IS.

In a society that has already been destabilized and afflicted by identity-based retrenchment, American policy, by handing the reins of power over to erstwhile Shiite exiles, planted the seeds of an armed jihadist uprising, from which IS has arisen.

The years 1990-2000 brought to light—and very explicitly so in Iraq—the regime’s particularly fragile foundations. IS’s sudden conquest of Mosul in 2014 is, from this perspective, revealing. The Iraqi military was not really beaten by the sudden appearance of several hundred jihadist combatants: it simply refused to fight in order to defend a central government that was discredited and corrupt, just as it had refrained from doing during the American invasion in 2003.

It is not simply a question of the balance of power: the state, the military, and other institutions can no longer be taken for granted and suffer from a legitimacy deficit. Consequently, what remains of this state is forced to rely on local potentates and militias (who receive the stipends one would expect) to try to regain control of the situation.

**Matthieu Rey:** The change that occurred in Syria in the 2000s took place in three stages. The first was when Bashar al-Assad came to power: Syria is the only Arab country to have successfully pulled off a father-son succession—though not without tension. Bashar al-Assad’s assumption of power would modify the situation created by Hafez al-Assad in two ways.

First, unlike his father, he immediately acceded to the pinnacle of power, without a struggle. This fact resulted in another change. Hafez al-Assad governed in partnership with other prominent figures, people who had risen with him during the power struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. The latter constituted a kind of advisory board. Under Bashar, they became a threat and were sidelined. His power retreated to his clan: his brother and particularly his brother-in-law, Rami Makhlouf, who controlled the Syrian economy and exploited it on behalf of the Assad clan, preventing a more equitable distribution of wealth.

Next, even before his coronation and in order to secure his authority over the old guard, Bashar al-Assad was prepared to barter Syrian sovereignty in exchange for political and economic support from foreign powers. In 1998, he thus recognized the Turkish border, a decision made official in 2005. Until then, Syria denied Turkey any sovereignty over the Sanjak of Alexandretta, a territory given to Turkey by France in 1939. Where Hafez al-Assad was more inclined to turn Syrian territory into a sanctuary, directing the struggles of external actors towards other Middle Eastern countries, Bashar al-Assad brought foreign actors back into the Syrian power game. He was prepared, to increase his power, to distribute segments of his authority.

This strategic use of territory and sovereignty for the purpose of enhancing his authority is critical for understanding the post-2011 period, when he came to depend more and more on his Iranian and Russian partners and IS established itself in eastern Syria.

The transformation that occurred in the 2000s was provoked, finally, by regional upheaval: the overthrow of the Iraqi regime threatened Syria—Bashar al-Assad believed he was next on the list—which worked hard to ensure that the Americans would lose the peace in order to deter them from intervening in Syria. Bashar al-Assad’s regime thus sent men to support the Iraqi uprising against the Americans, while also participating in international efforts to fight terrorism. It was a skillful strategy, as he knew these people, whom he had helped train and send to Iraq. Syria’s strategy sought to feed the Iraqi chaos, not to create it: it was a window of opportunity that was fully exploited for the purpose of keeping the regime in power.

**Loulouwa Al Rachid:** When it comes to security, authoritarian regimes have a *savoir-faire* that, in the wake of September 11, 2001, became an extremely valuable and “bankable” resource at the international level. This explains why Western democracies continued to cooperate with them. One is dealing, with these regimes, with specialists in security—but also, at times, with specialists in insecurity.

With the help of his intelligence services and his political police, Bashar al-Assad thus cultivated a relationship with the jihadists. He allowed a space to develop along society’s margins where people, weapons, money, and contraband of all kinds could circulate freely. The seeds of this arrangement had existed since the 1990s, but in the 2000s it would take on completely different proportions.

It is along the territory straddling Syria and Iraq (which began to emerge in the 2000s), where official borders cease to be relevant, that IS has now established itself. The phenomena we are witnessing today is largely due to a proliferation of local actors, notably the middlemen and power-hungry entrepreneurs who now control the population, and who participate in multiple but unstable allegiance networks: some work for the Americans, others for the Saudis, the Syrians, and Iranians.

**Matthieu Rey:** In order to consolidate their power internally, local actors need external partners—like Western powers and the international community—to whom they can trade whatever the latter need. In Syria’s case, they sold the war on terrorism. Still, unlike in Iraq, one cannot say that a militia system existed in Syria in the 2000s, in that the regime still had a monopoly on violence and authorized illegal smuggling, which it could control.

But this strategy was risky for a regime that allowed men it could never completely control to be trained to fight, who returned to Syria with experience in battle, and who gathered in more or less official spaces of socialization, such as prisons as well as smuggling networks and so on. The regime still knew to lock up those who threatened it. Thus the Saidnaya prison was full of men returning from Iraq, proof of the regime’s willingness to fight terrorism. In 2011, Bashar al-Assad, faced with protests, decided to “yield to the pressure” placed on him by his people and especially the international community: he freed political prisoners, choosing them selectively among battle-tested Iraq veterans. These were the future jihadist brigade heads who first appeared on Syrian territory in 2012. In the name of reform, the regime organized the deployment of militants who had trained in Iraq throughout Syrian territory.

The other upheaval of the 2000s was Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon. Under UN pressure, Syrian troops left and brought an end to the mass plundering of this territory. These practices were brought home to Syria. With Rami Makhlouf’s help, the regime opened Syria up to such ventures: land that had been primarily agricultural was transformed into tourist resorts, which at a time of food shortages further weakened Syrian society. Of these regions, Hawran—whose capital, Deraa, became a driving force of the revolution—was particularly affected. This strategy proved extremely profitable to the young urban elites belonging to Makhlouf’s entourage who, by the same token, found new ways to enrich themselves independently of the intelligence and police services. The regime was thus forced to recruit police personnel beyond the usual Alawite elite. It drew in particular from the tribes living around cities such as Deir ez-Zor, i.e. along the Iraqi border, and who participate in the smuggling activities discussed earlier.

Thus a major transformation of Syria's social structure coincided with deepening resentment towards the Assad family and an intensification of strategies for controlling resources (particularly oil) on Syrian territory.

In 2011, the Syrian people rose up, challenging two of the pillars of the regime: coercion—in other words, systematic torture—and plundering. The peripheral regions that suffered the most from these policies were the first to revolt. The protests quickly assumed a military character when conscripts deserted. Faced with this new threat, the regime chose retrenchment, borrowing a strategy that closely resembles what happened in Iraq. It identified territories that it deemed necessary and vital: Damascus, Homs, and the road to the coast. It withdrew from other areas, notably the Syrian-Iraqi border where, beginning in the summer of 2012, men and weapons could move with no restrictions whatsoever. The regime thus abandoned a strategically important region. Did it create the Islamic State or cooperate with it? Not at all. But it did nothing to prevent its expansion.

***Books and Ideas:*** IS operates transnationally but has deep roots in Iraq and Syria. What specifically does IS owe to Iraq, on the one hand, and Syria, on the other? And how do you explain the fact that a “Syrian imaginary” has prevailed in IS discourse?

**Loulouwa Al Rachid:** This is where another key factor in IS's genesis comes into play, namely, the problem of the exclusion of Arab Sunnis from power in Iraq, a problem dating to 2003 that has yet to be resolved. Sunnis were, as a group, associated with Saddam Hussein's regime and, after 2003, were made to pay the price. Since then, they have experimented with various options: armed insurrection, the boycotting of elections, the support of new, post-Baathist institutions, peaceful protests, and so on. Yet deep down, they do not accept their status as a political minority, which have assumed in the new Iraq due to their demographic weakness. They see themselves as mistreated, humiliated, and overthrown. The American strategy of arming Sunni tribes to get rid of Al Qaeda in Iraq weakened and divided the Sunni world by preventing the emergence of strong leadership; it nourished the resentment of those who were excluded from this cooptation and triggered fratricidal tribal conflicts.

From this standpoint, the government of Nuri Al Maliki (2006-2014)—who belonged to the old Syrian exiles discussed above—despite the fact that he was meant to be a symbol of Shiite-Sunni reconciliation, proved particularly intransigent towards Sunni Arabs, contributing to their radicalization and a resurgence of armed groups.

Beginning in 2012-2013, as a result of the conflation and militarization of the Syrian situation with the Arab Spring, jihadist elements reemerged to “avenge” the Sunni world. Thus it was in the name of exclusion and its corollary, radicalization, that longstanding Al Qaeda activists once again became active and began reassembling their networks. Except that in this instance, jihad was no longer directed against the Americans, but against the religious Other: the Shiites. Yet the Iraqi matrix did not allow IS to project its full strength. This is where Syria enters the picture.

**Matthieu Rey:** On the Syrian side, we have on the one hand a revolutionary process, beginning in 2011 (the people rose up and were massively repressed), and on the other, beginning in the spring of 2012, a war between the regime's armed forces, which began bombing cities, and disparate groups claiming to be part of the revolution. It was against this background that IS intervened. It entered Syria in 2013. It benefited from the confrontation, which allowed it to adopt a discourse colored by universalism and to proclaim that it was



engaged in a struggle of good against evil. IS capitalized on the systematic destruction of a population, much of which is Sunni, to transform the conflict into a defense of Islam, which it claimed had been crushed by the international community's indifference. IS uses the discourse of suffering humanity as part of its struggle.

On the ground, between 2012 and 2013, the Iraqi and Syrian segments grew closer, taking advantage of the open territory along the Syrian-Iraqi border: this resulted in the birth first of Al-Nusra, then of IS. The differences between them had to do with allegiances and the geographic scope of their struggle. Al-Nusra professed allegiance to Al Qaeda, a distant sponsor that allowed Al-Nusra to remain engaged in a purely Syrian struggle. Contrary to analyses that view this affiliation exclusively in terms of terrorism, it should be seen, rather, as a way of securing resources—those of international jihadist networks—even as the sponsor has no real ability to act, since it is not present on the ground. To the contrary, IS claims that its fight began in Iraq and would continue in Syria. IS equates the Sunnis' struggle against the oppressive Shiite minority in Iraq with the Syrians' against the Alawite minority: in short, in IS discourse, Nuri al Maliki is the same as Bashar al Assad. Most importantly, IS has abandoned any idea of revolutionary struggle. From its perspective, the goal of the struggle is the immediate creation of a caliphate, regardless of the revolution's outcome. Whether the revolution is crushed or not doesn't matter. It can still rule eastern Syria and implement its ideas. Very quickly, revolutionary forces have become its primary target.

But what Syria offers IS that Iraq does not is the possibility of universalizing its goals. If IS had stayed in Iraq, it would have been stuck in an internal Iraq conflict with no broader implications. The Iraqi question does not really make a lot of sense to people elsewhere. Furthermore, the existence of countless armed groups makes it difficult to understand who is fighting whom. Syria allows IS to tap into the revolutionary energy. It can exploit the discourse of suffering humanity: pictures of tortured bodies, which taps into Arab ideas about the oppression of the weak by the all-powerful, of those with nothing by those with the right to do anything, of the defenseless by those with all the tools of violence. For the Arab peoples, such themes refer to two situations: colonialism, memory of which is still alive, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Thanks to Syria, IS can capitalize on this sense of injustice, even as, on the ground, IS is crushing the Syrian revolution, whose project has nothing to do with its own. It is eliminating the main figures of the 2011 revolution, which it sees as enemies, since these actors are capable of waging armed combat and building a society that is different from the one IS wants. IS is in direct competition with the revolutionaries of 2011, though it has experience in waging campaigns of repression against them.

Unlike Bashar al-Assad's regime—and herein lies IS's strength—the men recruited by IS, who belong for the most part to families whom the revolution sidelined (the cousin of the old party representative, and so on), have a lot of experience with the terrain and with clandestine life. They know their society well. Consequently, they know whom to arrest and to kill. IS thus represents a far more serious threat than does the regime to this "other Syria" many have called for since 2011.

***Books and Ideas: How would you characterize IS's relationship to violence? Is it unprecedented?***

**Matthieu Rey:** IS's relationship with the population is different from that of an ordinary state. It requires allegiance from everyone, in a way that divides society into different groups. It engages in dialogue and strategic partnership with people under its control. This involves sending signals ranging from acts of extreme violence (for instance, the massacre of a tribe) to simple warnings followed by invitations to talk, consistent with the pragmatic approach pursued by Baathist regimes. In this instance, the case of the city of Tal Abyad along the Syrian-Turkish border is very revealing: this city (which has since been retaken by the Kurds) "fell" into IS's hands without any fighting, but as a result of a series of negotiations. Furthermore, as a result of their firm knowledge of local society, they also know exactly how far to go in their strategy of conquest. They refrain, for example, from entering territories they believe they will be unable to control. They extend their influence very gradually.

As for violence, one point that is insufficiently emphasized is that yes, of course, IS has engaged in spectacularly bloody and brutal behavior. But it has done so in a context in which the level of violence is already extremely high and unprecedented. Quantitatively speaking, it has engaged in low levels of violence. For decades, Syrian and Iraqi society have seen hundreds of thousands people killed, tortured, and forced to leave their homes. At present, in Syria, there are five million people under siege who are dying of hunger. IS's strength lies in the fact that it has been able to legitimate this violence in the name of a struggle for good and evil. This is why they now need Syria far more than Iraq.

**Loulouwa Al Rachid:** IS operates in a society in which violence has become commonplace, even aestheticized, notably among economically and geographically marginalized youth. IS is clearly a violent and revolutionary entity, in the sense that it seeks to establish a new moral, sacred, territorial, and military order. But the violence it practices has nothing to do with the kind that France experienced in 2015; its purpose, rather, is to impose a new order which, in this respect, makes its violence similar to that carried out by Baathist regimes. Violence—the massacre of a tribe, for instance, or the execution of traitors and spies—indicates red lines that must not be crossed and the imperative of total obedience. The judicious way in which cruelty is calibrated is tied to IS's firm knowledge of their society.

Even if their ranks include many foreign jihadists, notably from Europe, IS's men are not exiles who for decades have cut all ties with their society and who, when they see it up close, are overcome with horror. These are people who are deeply enmeshed in the local social fabric: they know its fault lines and its weakest links very well. It is in this local rootedness that their strength lies.

Thus while they might be called terrorists here in France, this term has little relevance where they are. In Iraq, unlike in Syria, the dynamic driving IS is that of a territorial, administrative, and political secession of the Sunnis from the center. And it is because it is really a war of secession that the outcome is likelier to be milder in Iraq than in Syria. As I see it, the IS phenomenon is less difficult to deconstruct in Iraq than in Syria because of its local rootedness. If the Syrian-Iraqi matrix can be uncoupled, if IS can be reinserted into a purely Iraqi dynamic, the Baghdad government and the international coalition may begin to resolve the situation. In any case, the phenomenon of the Islamic State cannot be reduced to a form of Levantine terrorism.

Published in Books&Ideas, April 28, 2016

©**booksandideas.net**

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), February 9, 2016. Translated from the French by Michael Behrent with the support of the Institut français.