

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
FALK AUDITORIUM

THE ISIS APOCALYPSE:
THE HISTORY, STRATEGY, AND DOOMSDAY VISION
OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. WITTES: Well, good morning, everyone, and thank you for braving the Pope.DC.gov parking restrictions and traffic restrictions to make it down to Brookings today. I'm Tamara Wittes. I direct the Center for Middle East Policy at The Brookings Institution, and I'm really delighted to welcome all of you here today for the discussion of a fantastic new book by my colleague, Dr. Will McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*.

You know, for me it is some of my most meaningful days here at Brookings are the days when we gather to mark the publication of a new book by one of our scholars. In an era of 24-hour news cycles, social media, it's all too easy for our policy discourse to fall victim to the environment that surrounds it and the demand for click bait: superficial, simplistic thinking about the problems of the world and how to solve them. And this kind of instant analysis can often look bold, truth-telling, innovative on first glance, but it often doesn't hold up in the face of complex realities.

Folks, there are some seats over here if you are looking for a chair.

At Brookings, we start from the premise that if policy problems were simple, they would have been solved a long time ago and that if we want solutions that work, we have to dig deeper. For nearly 100 years, that's what we've been doing here, and in-depth, long-form research -- our books, primarily -- that's the foundation for everything else we do.

Now, what's so special about Will McCants and this book is how he spans the spectrum from the painstaking work of analyzing jihadi texts to adding value in today's social media-driven news environment. Will is an historian of religion, specifically of Islam, and he brings his knowledge to bear on a very contemporary subject: the beliefs and behavior of the so-called Islamic State and other jihadi movements. He's put his academic training and his deep knowledge of Islamic theology and history to work in the U.S. Government, working on counterterrorism for the State Department and in the counterterrorism center at West Point. He helped build some of the multilateral infrastructure to combat jihadi recruitment that we see operating today.

And since taking over our project on U.S. relations with the Islamic world, Will has applied his expertise and his policy experience to innovative projects that are helping us all understand where Islamist movements, both violent and nonviolent, are headed in the wake of the region's upending.

ISIS-2015/09/22

At the same time, he's brought his impressive policy and scholarly work to a broader audience by innovating platforms on the web. He founded Jihadica.com, which I think became a source for a whole generation of new terrorism scholars. He's been twice listed as a top 100 Twitterati by *Foreign Policy* magazine. But most impressive of all to me: he is a past winner of the Twitter Fight Club. (Laughter)

MR. McCANTS: No? No applause for that one? (Laughter and applause)

MS. WITTES: Yes. Okay, which reminds me that our hashtag for today's event is #ISISapocalypse, and I encourage all of you here in the room and those watching on the web to Tweet your comments, Tweet your questions. We will be taking questions from Twitter using this hashtag as our discussion goes along.

Now, given the dizzying pace of developments in the Middle East over the last four years and the unprecedented nature of the changes that we've seen, there's plenty of market share for instant analysis, but ISIS is a puzzle that demands we dig deeper. It's not merely a terrorist group bent on killing Americans, although the threat it presents to U.S. interests has drawn America back into military engagement in the Middle East. It's not merely a sectarian militia fighting in the civil wars of Iraq and Syria. It's not merely a proto-state, seeking to establish and expand a new and very brutal form of governance. It is all of these and more, and Will's new book delves into the history and ideology of this group to help us all understand how ISIS became so successful, what it will take to stop it, and how this group will affect the broader evolution of jihadi movements from this point on.

Now, to talk through the lessons of Will's new book we are truly delighted to welcome to our dais -- I think for the first time, Dina -- Dina Temple-Raston, counterterrorism correspondent for National Public Radio. Dina has been reporting on the war on terror for about as long as there has been a war on terror and goes deep into the issues with travel out in the Middle East and South Asia, as well as excellent reporting and some deep sourcing in Pentagon and national security agencies here in Washington.

And Dina brings to this beat, also, previous experience working on civil rights issues here in the United States. And from what I see of her work, I think that adds a lot to the reporting and to the policy debate about the tradeoffs that we face and that policymakers face every day in combating

ISIS-2015/09/22

terrorism at home and abroad.

So I'm very grateful to you, Dina, for joining Will up here today. Will's going to kick us off with some insights into the book and then he and Dina will have a conversation that they will open up later to all of you.

Will, it's all yours.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you, Tammy, and thank you, Dina, for coming.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Absolutely.

MR. McCANTS: So Tammy just talked about the fast pace of social media, how we try and do the big think over a long space of time. Of course, that's the totally wrong setup for what I'm going to do right now, which is to tell you that my talk this morning was totally poll-driven by Twitter. Right? So I asked online what do you want to hear about? Do you want to hear about why the Islamic State succeeded or do you want to hear about why the Islamic State is so mean? Twitter tells me that the people demand to hear about why the Islamic State succeeded, so that's what I want to talk about this morning.

And one of the big questions that was driving me while I was writing the book was how had the Islamic State come to be such a political success as defined by control of territory, establishing governing institutions? How had it become such a political success when it had been such an abject failure just a few years previous, so much so that al Qaeda's leadership, which was nominally in charge of the Islamic State, saw it as an absolute embarrassment and wanted to distance themselves from it? How is it that such an organization that fared so poorly came roaring back and has performed so well, even after a year of constant pounding from the air and being nibbled away at from all sides? How do we explain it?

I offer in the book three possible explanations, and I think they all work together, but it has to do with the Islamic State's formula and it has to do with the changing political context. So the Islamic State's formula is basically state-building now rather than later, so don't put off the caliphate into the far distance. Do it right now.

Its formula is apocalypse now, not later. That the end of times is coming in just a few years and we are waging the final battles of the apocalypse. Other jihadists saw this as a far-off event.

ISIS-2015/09/22

And the third thing is that the Islamic State is incredibly brutal in its prosecution of insurgency and government in comparison with other jihadist groups. It's a formula that destroyed the Islamic State in its early days.

Most people don't know this, but the early founders of the Islamic State were completely apocalypse-addled. They believed that the end times was going to happen tomorrow and they made horrible strategic decisions as a consequence, spreading their forces all over Iraq, and was one reason why they ended up performing so poorly was the belief that the end times was right around the corner.

Another reason they fared so poorly is the fact that they believe themselves to be a state, despite the fact that they never really controlled any territory in their first incarnation, but they demanded to be treated as a state. And this proved to be laughable in the jihadist community and widely ridiculed because they controlled no territory.

And they also demanded that other groups in the insurgency bend the knee and give allegiance to them, which alienated a lot of those groups, again, because it demanded to be treated as a state and not just some other insurgent group.

The third thing are its brutal tactics. When rebels fight in wars they are generally pretty brutal. The Islamic State has pushed it to an extreme, especially in the way that it broadcasts its violence. And it does that to intimidate other people, other groups. It does it to intimidate the population that it hopes to conquer or wants to keep subservient once it does conquer. This also alienated many of the people that the group proposed to govern.

So between those three things then, you could say that the Islamic State really sowed the seeds of its own demise. But the political context also matters. They had agitated the population, the Arab Sunni Muslims that they propose to rule over, but that agitation could not have been expressed politically successfully had there not been a large American army there and had the uprising not been supported by the government in Baghdad. Absent that, the Islamic State might have been able to make good on its threats and eventually take that territory. So the political context matters a lot. There was something to resist it. It wouldn't be enough that the people would rise up. They would have to be armed, they would have to be supported. The Americans were there to do it. The government in Baghdad was there to do it.

ISIS-2015/09/22

Fast forward a few years and you have a complete turnaround. All of a sudden, the Islamic State controls a vast swath of territory, reaching from the outskirts of Aleppo all the way to Mosul. It's about the distance it takes to drive from Washington, D.C., to Cleveland, Ohio. It's a big tract of land.

How did they do it? Bin Laden just a few years previously was writing private memos to his lieutenants saying this is a train wreck. It is awful what has happened. They have gone about this completely the wrong way. We should never have moved to establish a state so quickly. All this apocalypse stuff is causing them to make bad decisions. They are way too brutal. All of these beheading videos have to go.

How did they suddenly turn it around? It was not by changing their basic formula. The basic formula stays the same. They tinker around the edges, but the basic formula stays the same. What shifted was the political context, which, all of a sudden, makes this formula work in a way that had not worked before.

One thing that happens is you had a government in Damascus and then in Baghdad that was more focused on maintaining its hold on power in its centers of power than it was in controlling the Sunni hinterland between Syria and Iraq. This provided a perfect opportunity for the Islamic State to state-build, which was its focus all along, as the name implies. So while they're busy state-building, other rebels are more focused on overthrowing the central government. And if you're the central government, say in Damascus, who are you going to focus on first? You're going to focus on the folks that are coming after you first. You'll deal with the other guys later. And so the state-building then works to their advantage because the politics made it possible to do so.

The apocalyptic recruiting pitch also works to their advantage. Islamic State propaganda is laced with references to the end of days in contrast to other jihadist groups where such language is not that prominent. It's mentioned sometimes, but in the Islamic State's propaganda it is a key part of their recruiting pitch. And there's been a number of reporters who have talked to foreign fighters asking them why they go to fight for the Islamic State and repeatedly they cite the apocalypse and the pending apocalypse as a main motivating factor, and they see the establishment of the Islamic State, of the caliphate, the so-called caliphate, as a fulfillment of prophecy. They want to be fighting on the right side of history as the end times drama unfolds.

ISIS-2015/09/22

So the fact that the Islamic State had this apocalyptic recruiting pitch whereas other Sunni groups did not meant that they attracted many more of the foreign fighters. There were other reasons, as well, but this was a key way to differentiate themselves. We can debate about whether they believed it or not, but in terms of a recruiting pitch one ISIS recruiter told a reporter the pitch always works.

Finally, the Islamic State's brutally worked to its advantage. Where other groups, rebel groups, were seeking to cooperate with one another and were more solicitous to the needs of the population, the Islamic State went in the other direction: intimidate its rivals, killed any of those who weren't willing to bend the knee, and scared the hell out of the population. This, again, is a matter of degrees, of course, but the Islamic State went very far in an extreme. And given that there was no large military there to oppose them in contrast to the last decade in Iraq, they had free rein. And any of the tribes that tried to rise up, they just executed their leaders or kidnapped their children.

And so today, there is not a lot of resistance from the Sunni Arab tribes in this hinterland between Syria and Iraq because the Islamic State has scared the hell out of them and there's no one there to really support them. So this formula then that had proven to be such a disaster in its first incarnation ends up being a formula for success in the Islamic State's second incarnation.

Now, the Islamic State has provoked a powerful international response. I assume over time the governments in the region will decide that they've had enough of the Islamic State. It's not a top priority right now, but once it is, they will get rid of it. My worry is that given all of the other security vacuums in the region, given the appearance of success that the Islamic State has had in its brutal state-building enterprise, my worry is that other jihadist groups are going to see it as a model for how to conduct insurgency and move away from the al Qaeda model, which emphasized more trying to win over the population. So my worry is we're in for some pretty dark days ahead.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: So just building on that, does that mean that your worry is that there'll be smaller pinprick attacks as opposed to the spectacular attacks that we've come to fear about al Qaeda?

MR. McCANTS: I think in the region it's going to be much more of a focus on state-building where there are security vacuums and not paying much attention to the hopes and desires of the

ISIS-2015/09/22

people that they hope to govern, basically doing it the way the Islamic State has been doing it.

For the United States and the threat to our homeland it's a bit different than it has been with al Qaeda. Al Qaeda wanted and tried to keep its affiliates focused on attacking the U.S. homeland. That's still where its focus is. The Islamic State's focus is on state-building and they don't mind that its followers try and undertake attacks in the West, but they don't encourage it a lot. Most of their propaganda is calling for young Muslims to come to the Islamic State and help build it rather than carry out attacks. They do advocate for attacks, but it's almost as an afterthought compared to al Qaeda, which puts a lot of emphasis on attacks in the West.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: So you say a lot of people are coming because they're attracted to this apocalyptic vision. It seems a lot of people are also coming for the same sorts of reasons that people went to the Spanish Civil War, because they wanted to be part of something bigger. And also, and this doesn't get discussed very much, a lot of the young men are coming for sex and wives. Can you talk a little bit about that? Because that actually, as much as the end of days argument that they have or the end of days sell that they have, just as vigorously are they selling, hey, you can have a really devout, beautiful wife. Just come here and set up shop. You don't even need to fight. You can be a plumber, you can be an electrician, but, look, we've got this wife for you.

MR. McCANTS: Yes, I think that's right. If you look at the motivations of the foreigners who go to fight for the Islamic State, they are many and varied. People who study this stuff talk about push-and-pull factors. The push factors are just as you said. They may be looking for a sense of fulfillment in their personal lives. They want adventure. They want to be part of something larger than themselves. Like many young males -- not me, but other many young males -- they want to just kick some ass. Some of them are looking to get married quite young, as well. So there is a variety of things that motivate people, and the Islamic State offers fulfillment of many of those desires.

It allows and it encourages its young fighters to get married. It is providing them with slaves that it takes, claims they're war booty and is handing them out to the fighters. It gives them a share of the wealth. It gives them a gun to go and fight. But it also offers them an opportunity to be part of this state-building project.

What's interesting to me is how they compare with the other groups and the propaganda

ISIS-2015/09/22

the other groups are putting out. You have the same environment and you have all these groups competing for the same market share of foreign fighters, but it's the Islamic State that's been most successful. And I think a lot of it has to do with being part of a state-building project and, also, this apocalyptic fervor that surrounds it.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: And I wonder, also, if part of it is also that they're not very choosy. I mean, if you're a psychotic, it is the absolute perfect place for you. In the same way that if you were a gang member on the streets and you can settle scores with a gun, there is a consequence in the streets of the United States. There is no consequence for that in the Islamic State. Can you talk a little bit about that? Are they getting all the crazies?

MR. McCANTS: Yes, they are getting a fair share of the crazies. And to make your point, I mean, if you look at their recruitment in contrast with al Qaeda's branch in Syria, Nusra, Nusra is far more choosy about who it lets come in because a lot of that has to do with the type of insurgency that Nusra is waging. It's waging the kind of insurgency that al Qaeda wants, a hearts and minds campaign for Muslims, build popular support, work with the rest of the insurgency. You have to have foot soldiers that are going to get with the program.

In contrast, the Islamic State is looking for young people who have a fascination with violence and like their brand of extreme insurgency. And so they're getting exactly the kind of recruits that they are going for. And I would note that the propaganda that they put out, this extreme violence that's so offensive to everyone, Muslim and non-Muslim, is carefully crafted not just to intimidate people, but to attract the sort of people that would be into that kind of thing because that's the kind of insurgency that the Islamic State is waging.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: And also online, what's amazing about the Islamic State is they actually have a travel agency. They make it really easy for you to go if you decide you want to go. It can be a snap second decision if you want to go. Can you talk a little bit about how it is people end up getting to the Islamic State?

MR. McCANTS: So one reason that there have been so many foreign fighters in this conflict compared to previous conflicts, and there have been -- the rate that they are entering is far higher than any previous conflict that we've seen that's involved foreign fighters -- is the ease of access. Right?

ISIS-2015/09/22

The fact that Syria shares a border with Turkey has made it very easy, particularly for Europeans, to come and join. It's also the case that a number of other fronts in the global jihad are winding down, so a lot of those fighters are coming, as well.

But to your point I think a lot of it also has to do with our new forms of communication over social media. It's much more easy to connect today through social media with a recruiter than it ever was when I started studying this stuff, which was more than a decade ago. You remember the old form of communications among jihadists were these private discussion boards.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Chat rooms.

MR. McCANTS: Chat rooms. And it was very difficult in that environment for anyone to know if they were really talking to another jihadist or was this some sort of informant. There was a lot of distrust there.

Social media, Facebook and Twitter in particular, have made it much easier for people to connect with one another. And there's some of the distrust still there, but a lot of it is gone because many of these young fighters are Tweeting from the Islamic State. They take pictures of themselves there, so there's instant credibility and they're able to connect with people over direct message on these platforms and tell them how to get there and who to talk to to come.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: So one of the things I really liked about your book is it starts from the beginning of the Islamic State when it was AQI in Iraq and sort of builds, so that you understand how its progression worked. And I want you to talk a little bit, because we haven't mentioned it yet, about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, and what kind of guy he is and how that fits into this formula that you say that the Islamic State has used to its advantage.

MR. McCANTS: He is unique among jihadist figures. His nickname growing up in his family and with his friends was "The Believer." This was someone who was known to be an introvert with a passion for religion and for soccer. And his brother recounts that whenever the young Baghdadi would come home from the mosque, he would lecture the other family members about how to be a proper Muslim. So he always gravitated to a very conservative form of Islam, but particularly forms of Islam that would encourage his proclivity to control the behavior of other people. And there is a trend in his life of gravitating to more and more extreme forms of Islam.

ISIS-2015/09/22

So it's not accident then that eventually he embraces a radical form of Sunni Islam that we call jihadism for shorthand, but this happens before the U.S. invasion. He's already radicalized. And it's the U.S. invasion that gives him and other -- in 2003, him and other jihadists an opportunity to carry out their beliefs and to give them an opportunity to rise to power.

He was always very good at negotiating between factions. When he was in U.S. detainment at Camp Bucca in 2004, he would move between the Baathists, the leftovers from Saddam's regime, and the jihadists, and made friends with all of them. And a number of these friends that he made on all sides came up through the ranks of the Islamic State with him.

Within the Islamic State there were a number of factions, foremost the Arab foreign fighters, which controlled the early Islamic State, and then the local Iraqi fighters. He being an Iraqi, but also a savvy politician, was able, again, to move between these factions. So in 2010, when the first head of the Islamic State is killed, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is elevated to the rank of emir and one of the reasons is that he had made friends on all sides.

The third thing he has going for him is his lineage. His tribe claims to be descended from Muhammad. Now, to become a caliph in Sunni Islam, most Muslims believe you have to be descended from Muhammad's tribe. And then there are certain prophecies that say when the caliphate comes back, the caliph will not just be descended from the tribe, but particularly from the family of Muhammad. So he has that going for him, too.

So he is a unique figure in jihadism in that he has this particular lineage, he has religious knowledge that's unparalleled, he has a Ph.D. in Quranic studies from a legitimate university, and he is a savvy operator. It is an unusual combination. And his own personality is one reason for the Islamic State's success.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: So his personality, I think one of the things that was a big turning point for me in looking at ISIS was the rape of Kayla Mueller, the 26-year-old American aid worker. We heard from Yazidi women who were sex slaves in his deputy's house that, in fact, he repeatedly raped her. How can you be everything that you've just described Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is and do something like that?

I think up until that point people who were studying ISIS thought maybe this was young

ISIS-2015/09/22

people run amok, who were taking advantage of the war booty and could and did. How can he do that as a religious leader?

MR. McCANTS: Well, the first thing I would say about the Islamic State in general is that it is very coarse. Right? This is a very rough form of jihadism, which sounds laughable because jihadism is already pretty rough, but this is a particularly coarse brand of jihadism. Part of that has to do with emerging in Iraq, which was a pretty coarse society under Saddam Hussein. It also has to do with the flavor of ultraconservative Sunni Islam that a number of these men and women adhere to. So I would say first that as background.

I would also say that for a man like Baghdadi, who has very rough appetites and a violent sensibility, he has found a way and the organization has found a way to justify that behavior by looking to the medieval Islamic traditions, so they have a very medieval sensibility. And I think other Muslims would take issue with them, rightly, over some of their interpretations. But, as I said, he's not someone who is ignorant of the texts and neither are the people around him, and they have found a way to justify these base appetites by using religion.

They've also found a way to justify their brand of insurgency by using religion. It doesn't make it right, but as an outsider, you know, I wouldn't pronounce on whether such behavior is Islamic or not. I would only note that these are men who are at once pious, but, too, violent. And they have been able to justify their violence with their version, their rough version, of piety.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: So one of the things that appeared to happen was al Qaeda in Iraq, its precursor, was that it was so brutal to the communities in which it was and killing so many Muslims, finally the Sunni Awakening said enough of you. And while they weren't completely stamped out, they were certainly diminished in a great way. Do you think ISIS or the Islamic State is going to go in that same direction, that finally they will anger and kill so many Muslims that they will lose their constituency and their power?

MR. McCANTS: So it's a question I grappled with in the book. I think, you know, a part of me really wanted to believe that if you take care of people, the people are going to take care of you and that this form of insurgency will not last, that the people will ultimately turn against you. But then as I look at the experience of the Islamic State and its success over the past two years, if I look at the success of

ISIS-2015/09/22

the Taliban in Afghanistan, if I look at the history of Saudi state, I would note that all of them waged very brutal insurgencies and all of them had staying power until they agitated powerful foreign nations. And I think that is the key difference. Without a powerful country to intervene, I think the locals can become agitated, but often they will need support from the outside in order to throw off a group like the Islamic State.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: So on the front page of the *Washington Post* this morning, there's a story about another shift in the American policy in Syria and specifically against ISIS, maybe increasing its role in Syria, maybe backing local militias. What do you think the solution is? Is it some sort of local militia?

MR. McCANTS: I think U.S. policy is headed in the right direction. You know, for a long time people have been calling for more boots on the ground. I think what we need is more sandals on the ground. I think we need many more of the locals involved in the fight against the Islamic State.

If you look at the Islamic State's own internal documents, what they identify as the center of gravity in the struggle are the Arab Sunni tribes. And their model for how to win over the support of the tribes was taken from the United States. Explicitly they say in their own internal papers the Americans did this right. The infidels figured it out in a way that we did not. The Anbar Awakening was genius. We need to copy what they did. And I think, in turn, we need to remember what we did and empower the locals, particularly the Arab Sunni tribes, to help them throw off the yoke of ISIS.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Okay, sandals on the ground, that's great. Why don't we take some questions from the audience? And I don't know if we have some Twitter questions as well. I'll point you out and if you could just stand up and identify yourself so we know who you are and actually ask a question would also be awesome, too. That would be great.

So how about this gentleman in a blue shirt sort of halfway up? Please wait for the microphone. She's right behind you. There she is.

MR. SIMPSON: I just have a question.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Could you identify yourself?

MR. SIMPSON: Ian Simpson just from the neighborhood. (Laughter) I'm just wondering, what's the role of Saddam Hussein's ex-military and security people in providing a little bit of

ISIS-2015/09/22

background and guidance to the Islamic State fighters? Thank you.

MR. McCANTS: You want me to take that one, Dina? Okay.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Yes, please.

MR. McCANTS: Their role is huge. I wouldn't say it's decisive, but it is pretty close.

There are ex-Baathists all up and down the leadership of the Islamic State today. Many of these men rose through the ranks with the current emir. A lot of them met Baghdadi when he was in the detainment camp in 2004. They have been very instrumental. And if you think about it, you can see why.

Number one, they have a lot of experience running authoritarian states. That comes in handy when you're ISIS and you want to establish an authoritarian state.

They also have 10 years of experience now in fighting an insurgency and surviving in the cutthroat politics, insurgent politics, of Iraq. These men have proven invaluable to the rise of the current emir and they have also been instrumental in prosecuting his wars in Syria and Iraq.

But often when this question is raised there's another implicit question there about the religiosity of these men.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Right.

MR. McCANTS: Is this just some sort of neo-Baathist socialist enterprise with the religious garb or are these guys true believers? It's tough to say, right, from the outside, and I would offer you two thoughts.

One is that many of these men came of age in the 1990s when Saddam Hussein, smarting from the Iraq War, began a policy of increasing the religiosity, particularly among the Sunnis, in the officer corps, in the intelligence services and also in the military.

I would also say that according to a number of inmates from U.S. detention centers they were breeding grounds for jihadism, so that many of these men who came in not caring particularly about religion left convinced jihadists and never really moved off of that footing. So my suspicion is that many of these men in the upper ranks of the Islamic State are true believers.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: The gentleman way in the back with the gray shirt, please.

MR. YOUSEF: Yassir Yousef. My question builds on Ms. Dina's question, but more elaboration will always be helpful, I think. For those of us who read and follow the Arab press, social

ISIS-2015/09/22

media platforms, I can note two things, two recent things.

First, there is an increasing and ongoing affection between the Iraqi ISIS leaders and non-Iraqi ISIS leaders, and this is principally, among other reasons, because of the dependency, increasing dependency, of ISIS on homicide bombers.

Number two, there is some Arab reports just a couple days ago that talk about an increasing defection among foreign fighters within ISIS. I think I read an Arab report that talks about 73 so far.

That brings me to the question. The reasons they cite is the same precise formula that you mentioned, that this organization is too brutal, too apocalyptic, and they want to state right now. So what's your comment on that?

MR. McCANTS: Mm-hmm. On the infighting between the foreigners and the locals, we see this in every conflict where jihadists attract a contingent of foreign fighters, so it's no surprise. It's also not surprising to me that a number of people who have gone to fight for the Islamic State become disillusioned.

What I would note is that the Islamic State has been very capable of replacing these people. Whether they have left or whether they have been killed, its propaganda is such that they have been able to replenish their ranks.

But these former fighters, I think, are really valuable for the struggle against the Islamic State, not in convincing current members of the Islamic State to leave so much, but in telling their stories to other people who might be thinking about going to join the Islamic State and telling them what it's actually like to live there as opposed to the propaganda that they've been given.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: And this is something that's been used before. You know, you talk to so-called formers in gangs. Right? And you have the formers go into high schools and you say this is how bad it was, this is the decisions I made, and this is what I wish I'd done instead.

And there's a report that's just come out of Kings College in the UK in which they gathered together the stories of 58 defectors, why they defected, what they found when they were there. And they're pushing the idea that these are the very people that should be filmed and put out there and put on the web and said, look, it's not what you think it is. It's not the Islamic nirvana that they are

ISIS-2015/09/22

presenting this as. This is a really tough organization. Living in Syria and Iraq is a really tough slog. It's a war zone and you shouldn't go there with naïve ideas, which is a lot of what's happening, particularly Westerners who are going.

Oh, we have a Twitter question.

SPEAKER: Since it's only 140 characters I'm going to ask two questions. Was the rise of ISIS possible without the Arab Spring? And can you speak a little more about women recruitment into ISIS?

MR. McCANTS: I don't think the rise of the Islamic State would have been possible had it not been for the civil war in Syria. If you look at their operational capabilities, they were a strong, clandestine terror organization just before the Arab Spring uprisings began. So they were making some headway as a terror organization in Iraq, but they certainly were not able to become a full-blown insurgency taking whole territory. It was the civil war in Syria that finally gave them access to land, to materiel, and also a strong, steady flow of foreign fighters, a lot of them coming across the border of Turkey that was allowing them to come through because they saw Assad as the greatest threat, not the Islamic State.

Also, the other security vacuums that opened up because of the Arab Spring created an additional number of fighters. A lot of weapons got loose in Libya, as well. A lot of prisoners were released, including in Syria a deliberate strategy by the Assad regime to add fuel to the fire, which also empowered the Islamic State.

On the question of female recruitment, there have been a lot of really great stories that have come out about individuals who've been recruited. And, again, their reasons for going are many and varied and often mirror those of the men. They want to get married. They want to engage in the state-building project. They want to be part of something larger than themselves. There's been a few stories about some women just feeling very lonely, either because they live in ultraconservative families that don't let them get out much or they don't have a lot of social ties.

I would like to make one point, however. There has been a trend in reporting on the issue to portray many of the women as very naïve and very passive, that they are just being duped into going. But many of the women who go, actually, are full-throated supporters of the Islamic State and they

ISIS-2015/09/22

remain such once they get there. And they have been some of the most vocal advocates for the Islamic State's extreme violence and some of the more effective recruiters reaching back into their networks back home.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Do you remember, just a couple of months ago there was a couple from Mississippi, who the woman was a convert and her boyfriend was, in fact -- I think his father was an imam or something? And she convinced him that they needed to go together. She convinced them that they needed to go.

And in Denver, you know, there are the three girls that we keep talking about who were underage, so there hasn't been a great deal of reporting on them, but they exchanged over 3,000 texts with somebody that they had fallen in love with in Syria, that they thought they had, someone like a "jihadi hottie" basically, a guy who had sent them a picture that they thought he was really cute and they fell for him. And they thought that they would have a blissful marriage together and a great time in the Islamic State, to the point that one of these girls is still not permitted to go back to high school because her father believes that she is still so in love with this man that given any sort of leash at all, she'd be gone.

The gentleman here in the purple.

MR. RICE: Thank you for Brookings for having this panel today. It's my first time being here.

So, yeah, I'm Johnny Rice. I have Johnny Rice End Times Ministry, johnnyrice123@gmail.com. And I can tell you I agree with ISIS on one account: that they say that they are fulfilling Bible prophecies of end times. Definitely they're one of the keys to Revelation 6 for the red horse rider. I'm not saying there's plenty of war --

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: I'm sorry, do you have a question?

MR. RICE: Yeah, let me just share that real quickly.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Okay.

MR. RICE: So they're fulfilling that along with the world government coming together. Even tomorrow, the United Nations, Pope Francis, and Obama are going to start selling a United Nations world government.

In the Quran this is 100 percent the religion --

ISIS-2015/09/22

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: But your question is?

MR. RICE: The question is, there's a lot of evidence with Snowden documents and other documents, Greenwald, about America funding and, you know, going back to Brzezinski with mujahedeen and then the Syrian rebels. Is America not funding -- have they not militarized and trained ISIS, which was previously al Qaeda, previously mujahedeen?

MR. McCANTS: I haven't seen any evidence of that. And, in fact, the interesting thing to note about the Islamic State is they don't get a lot of their money from abroad. They have become very good at generating their own income. They do it through kidnapping for ransom. They do it through oil. A lot of their revenue just comes from good old extortion or they call taxes. They have been very good at generating their own income.

And for some of the other groups that they are competing with, the other groups have attracted a lot of money from abroad, either from governments in the region or from private donors. The Islamic State is one of the few exceptions, which has made it a very difficult organization to counter because you can't cut off its sources of income from the outside.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: I've just been writing about this recently, about the changing role of Treasury in the national security enterprise, and how it has been able to cut off so much funding for al Qaeda that it made al Qaeda have to change its calculus. It made it have to decide on different kinds of plots because of this problem with money.

And even a year and a half ago, when it became really clear after there was the bank robbery in Mosul, it became really clear that the tools that they used for al Qaeda would not work with ISIS or the Islamic State. Because they are so intelligently self-contained, it's very hard to cut off their funding.

The gentleman in -- oh, sorry, I said this gentleman here in the blue tie, please, in the second row.

MR. PASHINSKI: Thank you very much. Phillip Pashinski. I have a question.

The structures of ISIS are most visible in Iraq and Syria, but apparently we are hearing of the other provinces being established in the region and in the farther region. Would it begin to point to the area where the most success (inaudible) might happen? Where potentially, if the ISIS sustains, would

ISIS-2015/09/22

you wish to see them? Is it Nigeria? Is it any other country in the region close by, Maghreb, or perhaps going back to the Taliban?

We are hearing additionally, and that's a linked question, that the part of al Qaeda are trying to correspond to the ISIS. So what's your call on this one? Perhaps two questions.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Let me just pull a couple of other questions because we've got five minutes left and we can sort of try and get them together. The young lady there in the green, please.

MS. PERLMAN: Yeah, Diane Perlman, School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason, also a political psychologist.

So first, for the record, I just want to say that in 2002 and '03 that my colleagues and I were all predicting that invasion of Iraq would inevitably lead to something like this or what Robert Jay Lifton called an "atrocious-producing situation." So my question is you said that he was radicalized before the invasion in 2003, so could you talk about any experience that you're aware that radicalized him and also a relationship with Zarqawi, who I understand was also part of the beginning of this, who was also transformed by being tortured in prison in Jordan, if I get that right?

And also, in terms of resolving -- making an impact and shifting this, it seemed that there has to be some alternative force attracting the same needs, the needs that people have to be part of something bigger, something more, that's not violent, and constructive. But is there anything -- I know that sort of changing from Maliki, you know, in Iraq was an attempt to have a more positive influence on Sunni Muslims, but it seems they need something that has a higher energy to attract people away from that.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: You keeping these in your head?

MR. McCANTS: Mm-hmm.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: This gentleman up here. So the first one is where else we might see ISIS? The second one has to do with Baghdadi.

MR. McCANTS: Okay.

MR. JECKO: Thank you. Larry Jecko. I'm just curious about whether you could speak a little bit more about the sectarian aspect about this, Shia and Sunni. It's my understanding that this is a Sunni movement with ISIS and al Qaeda, and they consider Shias infidels. So where does this end? I

ISIS-2015/09/22

mean, are they going to just have internecine warfare from now until one of those sects goes?

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Okay. I think we only have five minutes, so can you do all three of those in five minutes?

MR. McCANTS: Yes.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: Okay, that should be simple.

MR. McCANTS: So the Islamic State has a two-word slogan: Enduring, Expanding. Its claim to legitimacy has to do with the control of territory. It knows that it will lose territory in Syria and Iraq given the forces arrayed against it. To offset those losses and the potential damage to its own ideological project it is expanding into other countries. And whenever another group declares for it, it calls them a province. Some of these provinces are a joke, like the one that was declared in Saudi Arabia. No one had ever heard of these guys. People haven't heard much from them since that time. Some of them are quite powerful. Ansar Bait al-Maqdis in the Sinai is a very powerful insurgent organization. Boko Haram controls a large amount of territory in Northern Nigeria.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: How about Libya?

MR. McCANTS: In Libya, they have made a lot of inroads after being dismissed as a joke early on. Wherever you see conflict and security backings in Muslim majority countries, you will see the Islamic State try to exploit it for their state-building enterprise. And I would say if I were to guess where it might go next you might look at Somalia and the remnant of the Shabaab. I would not be surprised to see them enter that orbit.

On the radicalization of Baghdadi, this was more of an intellectual journey for him than it was a consequence of an experience in jail as happened for other jihadists. This was during his period in grad school, which for those of you that have been to grad school can be a very radicalizing time. (Laughter) But he gravitated more and more towards radicalism. He had an older brother that was interested in it. He had a mentor that was interested in it. And that's where he ended up in the early 2000s.

The final question about the Sunni and Shia conflict, the Islamic State was built on a sectarian premise. The premise is the Shia are the greatest threat to the Muslim community, not the external infidels, not the crusader alliance. It is the Shia. We have to get rid of the fifth column, the

ISIS-2015/09/22

argument goes, if we are ever to stand a chance against these outsiders.

This was born of the experience in Iraq. This is not al Qaeda old guard perspective. The old guard's perspective is, yeah, the Shia are kind of a problem, but we can work with them, especially we can work with Iran because they are so realpolitik. We can work with them. They even worked a little bit with Hezbollah. That was the old guard al Qaeda.

The new generation that came up through Iraq, where sectarian issues are very important in a way that they are not important in other Sunni majority countries, cultivated this sectarian tone. And Zarqawi saw this sectarian strategy as the way for the Sunnis and particularly the jihadists to come out on top.

He writes a letter in 2004 to al Qaeda's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current head of the organization. And Zarqawi says in 2004 we are going to wage war against the Shia and we are going to do this because they deserve it, they are working with the infidels against us, and by doing so we will force them to overreact and attack the Sunnis. And if they do that, then the Sunnis are going to need us around to take care of the problem. It is a deliberate strategy informed by local identity politics, theology, and a clever assessment of how to use violence to gain an upper hand in insurgency and in a civil war.

MS. TEMPLE-RASTON: The book is called *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. Please join me in giving Will a hand. Thank you for coming.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you, Dina. (Applause)

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