

## Munich

A few months ago **Tony Blair** apologised for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and said that without that war the Islamic State could not have taken shape.

What he did not say is that its genesis started with **the creation of the myth of al Zarqawi at the hands of the American and British administrations.**

At the end of 2002 both the US and the UK struggled to justify a military intervention on Iraq based upon Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction. Several inspections had produced no proof of such weapons. So it was decided to find a link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. **Though al Qaeda was indeed an enemy of the Iraqi regime, both the US and the UK fabricated proofs that bin Laden had send to Iraq one of his men to cooperate with Saddam. That man we were told was al Zarqawi.**

Abu Mussad al Zarqawi was not even a member of al Qaeda. He was a radical Salafist from Jordan, who until the invasion of Afghanistan had run a camp in Heart, near the Iranian border, to forge suicide bomber to carry out attacks in Jordan. **Unlike al Qaeda, his goal was not to fight the far away enemy, i.e. the West, but to build the Caliphate, a political entity able to challenge the legitimacy of the Muslim powers in the Middle East.**

However, the simple fact that the US had singled him out as the al Qaeda's man in Iraq was sufficient for the world to believe that indeed he was the new super terrorist. Almost overnight, al Qaeda's sponsors began establishing contacts with him, bankrolling his organization in Iraq. By August 2003, when he masterminded an attack against the offices of the UN and against a Shia mosque, al Zarqawi was the most powerful jihadist in Iraq.

Until then Iraqi Sunni and Shia had not fought each other. **Al Zarqawi purposely set in motion a sectarian war** because he feared the formation of a united front against Coalition forces. Had that happened, the jihadists would not have had a chance to lead the insurgency. **So the root causes of the sectarian warfare are linked to a strategic decision taken on the ground in Iraq.**

The popularity of al Zarqawi convinced **the top ranking officers of the dismantled Iraqi army and intelligence** to join his group to fight Coalition forces. They were all Sunni, predominately coming from the Sunni triangle, so al

Zarqawi's sectarian war did not bother them. On the contrary as the Shia elite grew closer and closer to the Coalition forces, they joined in the fight.

### **Camp Bucca**

Al Baghdadi, the caliph of the Islamic State, was one of the people who fought with al Zarqawi in Iraq. In 2005 he was arrested and imprisoned in camp Bucca together with several former top member of Saddam's army and intelligence. During these years they plotted and planned the next chapter of their fight. In 2010, when the American left Iraq and Camp Bucca was closed, the future elite of the Islamic State was set free. At that point they began implementing their plan of action.

**It is important at this point to stress that the Islamic State has two natures: one is religious, i.e. the jihadist radical salafists, and the other is secular, i.e. represented by the former military establishment of Saddam Hussein. What they had in common is the desire to build a new nation, a sunni nation. Nationalism became the glue, the common denominator between these two very different elements.**

**Right from the beginning their aim has been to create a nation and to use it as a launching pad for their fight.** This is a unique feature. For all the previous jihadist groups, including al Qaeda and the Taliban, **the Caliphate was the final goal of the jihad, for the Islamic State the Caliphate is an instrument of war, a tool to achieve victory.**

Against this background it is easy to understand why in 2011 the elite of the Islamic State decided to cross over to Syria where the regime's repression of the Arab Spring had ignited a civil war which was fast becoming a sectarian war by proxy.

While Iran backed the regime of Assad, bankrolling also the involvement of the Hezbollah in the conflict, the Gulf States were funding sunni armed groups, willing to fight against the regime of Assad. This was the ideal ground for the veteran fighters of the Islamic State in Iraq to find sponsors.

**How did the various sponsor fund their groups? Using oil revenues.** Oil became a weapon and still is. As the war by proxy in Syria escalated, more oil

was needed to meet the expenses, so they keep producing it. It is within this context that Iran willingness to discuss with the Obama administration the end of the economic sanctions should be analysed. Indeed in 2016, its consequences will have a huge impact on the oil market and on the Syrian conflict.

Instead of fighting against Assad, the Islamic State attacked the other jihadist groups to establish themselves as the strongest organization and to carve their own territorial enclave. Soon the Sunnis sponsors diverted most of their funds to the Islamic States, depriving of cash the other insurgent groups, they de facto bankrolled, without knowing it, the birth of the Caliphate.

The Islamic State targeted **strategic regions rich in natural resources:** oil, water and rich agricultural land. Using Saddam Hussein old strategy, they **first sent small death squad who eliminated any opposition, then they moved in military and once the region had been conquered the army moved out leaving the area to civilian rule.**

This is a key point. **No other armed organization has ever distinguished between military and administrative and bureaucratic personnel.** This is a distinction that springs from **the modern state whose tasks are: to provide inside its borders national security and law and order.** Military forces are engage in national security, they protect the borders. Police and administrative forces have the task to maintain law and order. ISIS has followed this model.

**The administrative and bureaucratic machine not only pacifies the areas conquered by the army, it also fixes the infrastructure.** Water, electricity as well as hospital, markets and schools were re opened so that the population enjoyed a return to normality. Let's not forget that this are areas which have been in the grips of political anarchy, plagued by war lords and criminal gangs for a long time.

**On the economic front ISIS applied the capitalism model. The exploitation of the local resources** were handed over to the tribal leaders who would run them and pay a royalty to the Islamic State. Oil, which today accounts for about 20 per cent of the GDP of the Caliphate is extracted and smuggled by the local population. **The distribution of profits is left to the tribal leaders.**

**This innovative approach, social works and handing over of resources to the local population, aims at obtaining the consensus of the population.** Something that no other jihadist groups has ever sought.

By 2013 the enclaves controlled by the Islamic State were able to generate enough money to self sustain the local economy as well as the expansionary war that the group was conducting. At this point the money of the sponsors were not any longer required.

The Islamic State had successfully become financially independent and was able to declare the birth of the Caliphate, its strongest weapon, with a video that went viral. A jihadist from Chile knocked down the poster of the border between Syria and Iraq, ending a geo-political division that the Europeans had created at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Soon after the army of the newly born nation successfully attacked Mosul and the surrounding area.

Two are the main point emerging from these events:

- **The Caliphate is a weapon of the jihad, which has been reformulated as an anti-imperialist insurgency.** Hence the Islamic State did not use an Arab, not even an European, to present the Caliphate to the world but a South American, from a country which had been victim of one of the most brutal military coup of the Cold War, Chile. Hence, its **flag has become the ideological umbrella of an anti-imperialist front** which stretches from Boko Haram in West Africa to al Qaeda in the Maghreb in the Sahel all the way to Libya, the Sinai, East Africa with al Shabab. And then up to the Arabic peninsula with Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula, then Syria, Iraq, and again the Taleban, Pakistan, South East Asia. **The danger is that the Caliphate will become a federation of new states born out of the political chaos and anarchy of large segments of the Muslim world and that its reson d'être will be to propose an alternative to the Western political and social model of Nation State.**
- **The second point is the instrumental nature of the Caliphate in carving the boundaries of the new nation.** We have seen a similar approach to nation building before, **in the formation of the United**

**States. The revolution and the declaration of independence was the launching pad to colonise the West.** The myth of the frontier became the heart-bit of a growing nation, which never stop growing until it reached the Pacific.

**If the Caliphate is a weapon of an anti-imperialist insurgency at global level and if its political horizon is the Muslim world,** bombing as well as funding a war by proxy in Syria, will only reinforce these characteristics among the Sunni population. And this explains why since June 2014 we have witnessed a proliferation of attacks both in the West and in the Muslims world under its flag.

### **What Next?**

The scenario I have described is unique, we have never witnessed in history a similar phenomenon. Using traditional tools, such as military intervention will not improve the situation. **We all know that an ideology cannot be bombed, but it can be contained, it can be tamed.**

The success of the Islamic State rest on the desire of the Muslim population to redraw the map of the Middle East. Indeed, the Arab Spring was a manifestation of such desire, but it failed. **ISIS appeals to the young generation because it presents the Caliphate as the implementation of the Muslim political utopia,** it offers Muslims the opportunity to produce their political expression, something that had not happened since the fall of the first Caliphate. Failing to understand this point will only prolongue the blood bath. **Even if hypothetically we could bomb the Islamic State out of Syria and Iraq, in a few years we will face its reincarnation.**

So the solution must be political. Indeed it is in our own interest to find a quick solution. The world economy is suffering because of the political instability in the Middle East. Declining oil prices coupled with a slow down of China's economy are pushing us into another recession. Europe is flooded with refugees, a crisis which risks to affect the process of integration.

Diplomacy seems the only way forward to pacify the area, a process which necessarily will require approaching the Islamic State.

- Bring on board Russia, no agreement could be reached without Moscow;
- Reach out for the tribal leader of the region controlled by ISIS and establish a dialogue to contain the Caliphate;
- Partition Syria, letting Assad stay for an interim period until a new elite will take over;
- End the war by proxy by providing some recognition to the Islamic State under the fulfilment of specific conditions, e.g. human rights.

**Selling this programme to Iran and Saudi Arabia will not be easy, but the longer we wait the more difficult this task will become.**