

Osama bin Laden was killed in May 2011 by an American special forces team. The leadership of Al Qaeda then went to his long-term associate, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was also the principal ideologue of the organisation.

But Al Qaeda was soon overshadowed by a new transnational scourge, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). President Obama said in 2015 that ISIS “grew out of our invasion [of Iraq in 2003], which is an example of unintended consequences”.¹⁷

ISIS was the product of the disruptions deliberately affected in the Iraqi political order by the US military assault in 2003 and its subsequent occupation of the country. The privileging of Iraq’s Shia community by the US occupation as part of divide-and-rule policies gave rise to the first jihadi organisation in the country, the ‘Al Qaeda in Iraq’, under the zealot Abu Musab Zarqawi. In 2007, it evolved to become the Islamic State of Iraq, and in 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), when Iraq’s jihadis crossed the border and joined the anti-Assad conflict.

Between 2014-16, under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS set up a ‘caliphate’ across Iraq and Syria through a campaign of horrific violence that helped create a proto-state the size of Britain, with a population of 6-9 million and a standing army of 200,000. The ISIS attracted thousands of Muslim youths to join its cadres by imbuing them, in Gerges’ words, with “a greater purpose in life: to be part of a historical mission to restore Islamic unity and help bring about redemption and salvation”.¹⁸ This also provided ISIS with several suicide bombers, hundreds of whom carried out “martyrdom operations”.

ISIS projected itself as a rival of Al Qaeda in terms of ideology and operations. Crucially, while Al Qaeda continued to focus on the ‘far enemy’, al-Baghdadi now focused on the ‘near enemy’, prioritising the politics of identity, particularly sectarian identity. Al-Baghdadi followed in Zarqawi’s footsteps by wreaking extraordinary violence on the Shia in Iraq.

¹⁷ Fawaz A Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, p 51

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p 229

Jihad in retreat

Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in a US missile attack on his residence in Kabul on 31 July 2022. During his decade-long leadership of Al Qaeda, the organisation went into steady decline. As Daniel Byman has noted, despite sporadic attacks by some affiliates, the core group did not conduct any spectacular attacks on western targets.¹⁹ Cole Bunzel says Zawahiri left behind “an organisation in disarray”.²⁰

ISIS fared no better. During 2015-17, ISIS steadily lost territory in Iraq to well-trained Iraqi armed forces, backed by US military advisers. Mosul was retaken in July 2017; in December 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi announced the end of the war.

In Syria, the US mobilised the largely Kurdish Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) and retook the major towns under ISIS control – Manbij in 2016, Raqqa in 2017, and the last stronghold, Baghouz, in 2019. Al-Baghdadi committed suicide in October 2019 when he was confronted by US forces at Barisha, in Syria’s Idlib province.

The outlook for transnational jihad is bleak. Though Zawahiri was residing in Kabul, there is no evidence that the Taliban have allowed Al Qaeda to set a substantial presence in the country; Bunzel quotes a UN team as saying in July 2022 that the Taliban “had prohibited Al Qaeda from plotting external attacks from Afghan soil”, while in August that year an American official said that Al Qaeda had only a dozen core members in Afghanistan.²¹

ISIS, on its part, has been reduced to a few stragglers in Iraq and Syria who carry out sporadic acts of violence, but pose no threat outside the two neighbouring countries. The ‘Islamic State – Khorasan’ in Afghanistan draws the bulk of its members from Afghanistan and Pakistan. They do carry out attacks in different parts of Afghanistan, but are the enemies of the Taliban and there are frequent reports of fighting between them.

¹⁹ Daniel Byman, “Al-Qaida after al-Zawahiri”, Brookings, 3 August 2022

²⁰ Cole Bunzel, “The Jihadi Threat in 2022”, Wilson Center, 22 December 2022

²¹ Ibid

The principal source of jihadi violence in western countries are “lone-wolf” attacks by self-radicalised individuals who do not seem to have any links with extremist organisations. Recent attacks have included: stabbings in London and Reading in the United Kingdom, Paris, Conflans-Sainte-Honorine and Nice in France, and Dresden, in Germany.²²

The principal area of organised jihadi operations today is sub-Saharan Africa; this includes: Somalia; the territory that links Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and the area around Lake Chad and northeast Nigeria. While militant groups in these territories function in the name of Islam, their support-base emerges from local grievances relating to poor or non-existent governance and the failure of governments to deliver services and economic opportunities. None of them has the capacity or the interest to launch attacks outside their immediate domain.

Post-Islamism: outlook and prognosis

As all expressions of political Islam are being systematically erased from the public space across the Middle East, are we looking at a post-Islamist order in the region?

In 1996, the US-based Iranian scholar, Asef Bayat had invented the term “Post-Islamism”, which he had described as a “political and social condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism are exhausted even among its once-ardent supporters”.²³

Post-Islamists, he went on to say, do not abandon the role of faith in the state and society, but seek to reinterpret it. This leads to:

“an attempt to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on their head by emphasising rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity instead of fixed scriptures, and the future

²² Ibid

²³ Dokhanchi, Milad, “Post-Islamism Redefined: Towards a Politics of Post-Islamism”, *Journal of the Contemporary Study of Islam*, Vol 1, Issue 1, 2020

instead of the past. It wants to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom and modernity ...”²⁴

There is little doubt that we are now in a “Post-Islamist” stage in West Asian politics: while political Islam is in retreat, several attempts to set up a liberal state order have been thwarted.

The Arab Spring uprisings from 2010, impelled by the slogans “Freedom, Justice, Dignity”, had no Islamic content or inspiration, even though Islamist parties, being the best organised at the time, had been the beneficiaries of these upheavals in early elections. The second set of uprisings in 2018-20, in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq, brought down another four leaders, but Islamism, already under pressure, had no role in those movements.

Despite these major convulsions, the region has witnessed no political change; the forces of counter-revolution have proven much too strong. In response to the Arab Spring uprisings, while the oil-rich Gulf states did proffer billions of dollars as sops to their citizens to cool their ardour for change, the mailed fist of coercion was also used extensively; the great scholar Nazih Ayubi had told us four decades ago that “the Arab state ... is often violent *because* it is weak”.²⁵ Petitioners for reform were incarcerated in Gulf monarchies. The latter, in turn, have helped overturn nascent democracies in several Arab states to wipe out the whiff of activist Islamism that upheld the right of citizens to choose their governments and change them periodically.

The persistence of resistance

In response to demands for reform, most Gulf states have produced ambitious “Vision” documents to prepare their countries for a post-oil future. They also seek to make young people their partners in reshaping their polities as vibrant and exciting spaces for creativity and enterprise, founded on cutting-edge technology, that will take their nations to global leadership.

This makes sense since the under-25s constitute the bulk of the population. However, there is no place in these “visions” for any kind of political reform or popular participation in governance. The focus on the centrality of national

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Nazih Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, London, IB Tauris Publishers, 1995, p 450

identity, buttressed by slogans, “Saudi Arabia is Great” or “Saudi Arabia for Saudis”, has within it the sub-text of silencing all challenge and dissent.

Is this sustainable?

This author’s study of West Asian politics over the last century and a half contained in his book, *West Asia at War*, has revealed a persistent pattern of resistance in Arab states to domestic tyranny and external interventions. Thus, both activist and radical Islamism have been expressions of resistance as evidenced by the fight against foreign occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq and the attempts to obtain a democratic order to replace authoritarian rule in the wake of the Arab spring uprisings. Thus, political Islam, in its diverse expressions, provided the motive-force to safeguard national dignity or obtain reform in the political order, just as anti-colonial uprisings and republican revolutions had done in earlier eras.²⁶

While political Islam has now exhausted its capacity to effect change and authoritarian rule appears entrenched, the Egyptian scholar, Tarek Osman, had warned in 2016, that behind the façade of stability in several West Asian politics, there was immense anger among young people about the failure of their uprisings and there would be “new waves of demonstrations and revolts” that state authorities would not be able to quell by demanding loyalty and obedience.²⁷

Middle East history suggests that the authoritarian state order will evoke popular resistance despite the prospect of harsh response, when, as Ayubi told us, “the carefully erected façade [will] crack open to reveal all manner of horrid monsters that many thought History had long since laid to rest”.²⁸

²⁶ Ahmad, *West Asia at War*, p 419-22

²⁷ Osman, Tarek, *Islamism: What it means for the Middle East and the World*, London, Yale University Press, 2016, p 245

²⁸ Ayubi, p 448