The ISIS Fighter Still at War

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Mark Juergensmeyer

“This war is not over,” the tall, bearded Iraqi old me, his voice quivering with rage. Mohammad was a fighter for the Islamic State, and even though he was only 29 years old when I talked with him in prison in Northern Iraq, he had been a fighter with ISIS and its predecessor, al Qaeda in Iraq, since 2005. In his mind he was still at war.

Though he said the war was not over, in fact it was over for him in reality since he was serving what would be a long prison sentence, perhaps for a life time. The war was also over in another sense, in that he had left the militant organization in disgust over its corruption even before he was arrested and the movement was militarily defeated.

His story provides an interesting case study on how an extremist movement like this can end as a militant threat, even though its ideology of warfare persists. But to understand how this came about—how Mohammad came to reject the movement that enshrined the ideology of cosmic war to which he remains dedicated—we have to look at how he got involved in it in the first place.

The first stage of Mohammad’s militancy was one of identity politics. As a Sunni Arab he was incensed that the US occupation not only deprived Saddam Hussein’s loyalists of their occupations but also elevated Shi’a politicians to positions of prominence where they could systematically exclude Arab Sunnis from meaningful participation in the government or the receipt of lucrative government contracts. Though a young teenager at the time, Mohammad’s life was deeply disrupted and his anger turned towards militancy.

When Abu Musab al Zarqawi formed al Qaeda in Iraq, Mohammad saw it as a way of empowering Sunni Arabs. In 2005, when he was scarcely fifteen years old, he joined the movement and became a fighter for AQI. All his friends were doing it, he said, and the leaders that he met with at the time were inspiring. He saw it as a way of redeeming his community and proving his manhood. He saw the movement as a liberating force for Iraq, he said, adding that “Iraq had become a colony of

Iran.” Within a year, however, he was caught, arrested, and sent to prison for two years, from 2006-2008.

Those two years in prison comprised a formative phase in Mohammad’s radicalization. He described the prison as “jihad university,” since senior members of the movement were able to indoctrinate young recruits like Mohammad into the jihadi ideology. “We loved going to prison,” he told me, “it was just like going to school.” Classes were organized into different aspects of textual, historical, and theological studies. It was there that Mohammad embraced the anti-Shi’a, anti-Western apocalyptic Muslim extremism that later characterized the Islamic State. This, then, was the second stage of Mohammad’s radicalization, a religiously ideological stage.

When Mohammad told me what he believed, however, it was only the basics; it became clear that whatever the teachings he learned in prison, he was not currently able to articulate the finer points of theology. Instead, the principles of his faith seemed to boil down to three main points: opposition to the forces that were resistant to true Islam, (especially Shi’a, moderate Muslims, and Jews), opposition to Americans (whom he called Zionists and Crusaders), and belief in the coming Caliphate.

Sensing my discomfort at this point in the conversation, Mohammad sat down, and his voice calmed. He could tolerate Shi’a and Americans, he said, when he was not in the Caliphate. He had Shi’a friends when he was younger, he said, and they were good friends at that, but they were not anti-Sunni the way that the Baghdad Shi’a seemed to be. He also said that some Americans could be decent people, a statement that I inferred could apply to me, which gave me some relief.

But when one is under the reign of the Caliphate, he said, everything has to change. In order to fulfill history, there has to be a total cleansing. Using language that appeared to legitimate the actions of the Islamic State when it was in power, Mohammad said that in the Caliphate no Shi’a or non-Muslim foreigners should be allowed, nor should moderate Muslims be tolerated. Christians could purchase their release, he said, but everyone else would have to be annihilated. “They have to be killed” he said, coolly. Even your old Shi’a friend, I asked him? “Yes,” he said quietly, adding that “all who are against us have to go.”

After prison he quietly became reengaged with the movement, slipping under cover so he would not be identified by the Iraqi police. The era of ISIS was exhilarating for him, he said, though he would not admit to being formally a part of the organization. He was a “known person” within the movement, he said, and people came to him for advice and counsel.

ISIS fighter imprisoned in northern Iraq, Feb. 15, 2017. (Photo: Zohra Bensemra/Reuters)

Mohammad furthermore implied that he played a leadership role, and that he got into disputes with others in leadership positions within the movement. At one point, he said, there was violent infighting, and during the ensuing struggle he was shot in the stomach by another member of the movement. Mohammad lifted up his shirt to show me the scars on his torso which were indeed severe.

That was the point at which he lost all faith in the leadership, Mohammad said. He became disillusioned with the organization and its leaders. He continued to admire some of the main figures, such as Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, who proclaimed himself the

caliph, and Abu Mohammad al Adnani, who before he was killed in 2016 was the leading voice of ISIS and its chief spokesman. He had no use for Ayman al Zawahiri, the successor to Osama bin Laden as head of al Qaeda, since Zawahiri did not approve of the attacks on Shi'a. Mohammad regarded Iraq's Shi'a leadership as being a terrorist organization, more dangerous, he said, than ISIS or al Qaeda.

So he respected some if not all of the well-known jihadi leaders. But on the lower levels, there were often squabbles and infighting. Many of these lower level leaders, Mohammad said bitterly, were just in it for the money and the power. Others used the ability to kill and punish for revenge against people that they did not like.

What Mohammad told me confirmed much of what I have learned about how militant movements like this come to an end. The ideology does not change—and in fact, counterterrorism measures waste time trying to convince militants of their theological or ideological errors and trying to change their minds. What makes them quit the movement in many cases is a collapse of authority within the movement itself, or a realization that their militant tactics are not working. Mohammad understood the legitimacy of killing enemies of true Islam, he said, but this power was increasingly abused. Ultimately the followers of the movement were turning on one another.

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I asked him what he would do if he was ever able to leave the prison. He would rejoin his wife and family, he said, and get some sort of job, perhaps in construction or auto mechanics. He would not take up arms and join the movement again, he said, even in guerrilla warfare. "We did that," he mused, "and what did that accomplish?" Fighting has only destroyed the movement, he said, implying that it was destroyed both from outside and from within.

I wondered whether the idea of a great cosmic war would continue to loom so large in his imagination if the social and political situation were different—if, for instance, the government in Baghdad would welcome the Sunni Arab community as equal citizens? I wondered if the Iraq government would ever empower the Sunni tribal leaders in the way that led to the success of the Awakening movement against the earlier moment of al Qaeda activism in Iraq from 2006 to 2011. Without the sense of

Sunni Arab outrage would the apocalyptic ideology of ISIS still be a motivating force?

At present, however, the governments of Iraq and Syria have not changed their suspicions about Sunni Arabs, and Mohammad has not abandoned the towering image of cosmic warfare between the forces of true Islam and the forces of evil, especially the Shi'a politicians that had wrecked such havoc. He still believes there will be a time when the Caliphate will rise again, and he is convinced that there will be righteous struggle in order to implement it. He will be ready to fight then, and he looks forward to being once again a true soldier of that sacred cause.

But not now, he said. "Now is not the time."

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Mark Juergensmeyer is Professor of Global Studies and Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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