

# PRINCIPIA PURPOSE

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## A PRINCIPIAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON ISIS AND ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

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# ISIS AND ISLAMIC EXTREMISM:

## WHERE DID IT COME FROM AND HOW DO WE RESPOND?

by Janessa Gans Wilder

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I can vividly recall the horrific sight of children's toys and shoes jumbled amidst the skeletal remains of a mass grave I visited in northern Iraq in October 2004. These were innocent victims of Saddam Hussein's ruthless campaign against Iraq's Kurdish population in the late 1980s, in which thousands of men, women, and children were executed.

It's tough to contemplate the fact that, today, this area is under the control of an even more sadistic and terrorizing regime, the so-called Islamic State (IS) or ISIS, also sometimes referred to as ISIL or Daesh, its Arabic acronym. The group consists of over 30,000 foreign fighters, according to the United States' National Counterterrorism Center,<sup>1</sup> and takes in about \$500 million a year in revenue, largely from oil smuggling.

ISIS's medieval practices of beheadings, destruction of ancient cultural sites, sexual slavery, and wholesale elimination of villages have upstaged even its parent organization, al-Qa'ida, and have contributed to the largest refugee crisis in a generation. Unlike al-Qa'ida, ISIS controls territory and has a governing structure in place. It has even called itself an Islamic caliphate, the first such occurrence in centuries. (A caliphate is an >>



Photo by Nathaniel Wilder (C'04)

## About the Author

Soon after 9/11, Janessa Gans Wilder (C'98), a CIA analyst at the time, volunteered for a special assignment in Iraq. After 21 months there, one of her key takeaways was an acute awareness of Americans' lack of understanding of the situation in Iraq, and even more so of the Iraqi people.

Once back in the U.S., Wilder left the CIA in 2005 to found the Euphrates Institute, a nonprofit organization whose mission is "to prepare for peace, where the world needs it most—in, and with, the Middle East." The Institute fulfills this mission by cultivating informed and engaged global citizens with a focus on the Middle East.

The year after founding Euphrates, Wilder joined the faculty at Principia College as a visiting professor, teaching primarily Middle Eastern studies courses. This was also a time of rapid growth and development for the Institute, which was headquartered at the College. Over the next few years, Euphrates sponsored programs on campus, launched a student fellowship program, and hosted an international conference.

Principia College continues to have an active Euphrates chapter (one of a dozen chapters around the world), but in 2014, the Institute's headquarters moved to California, where Wilder lives with her husband and two children and serves as Euphrates' CEO. She maintains a special connection, however, with the College's chapter. In November, for example, she gave a metaphysical talk on campus that included background on ISIS and time for those in attendance to pray for peace in the region.

Islamic state governed by Islamic law and led by a supreme leader—a caliph, who is believed to be a political and religious successor to Muhammad, the founder of Islam.)

Americans are trying to come to grips with this latest phenomenon of extremism and understand the role, if any, we should play in countering it. It's a question I deal with every day, against the backdrop of my time in Iraq (largely focused on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency), on the one hand, and my current efforts to engage everyday Americans with the Middle East, on the other.

While I was in Iraq, the approach we took to fighting terrorism felt to me too much like catching drops of water from a leaky faucet. We expended our personnel, resources, and energy on catching bad guys, not on fixing the leaky faucet—i.e., fixing the problems that create terrorism and insurgencies to begin with. The experts with whom I spoke for this article agree that it's not in the American strategic culture to focus on long-term, non-military solutions, and yet—there is no military solution to the problem of ISIS. More importantly, they agree that even if ISIS's acclaim subsides and its views moderate, the next iteration of extremism is likely to be all the more brutal and outrageous.

This sounds bleak, and the world is still reeling from ISIS's horrific attacks on Paris, but I am not hopeless. I have experienced the impact of healing the divide between the Middle East and West through the power of personal relationships and understanding the "Other." As we widen the reach and

strengthen the efforts of those working for peace, inclusivity, and empowerment, we marginalize extremists and curtail the creation of would-be terrorists. I am confident that there need not be an all-out war between the Middle East and West—such as ISIS is trying to precipitate—but that, instead, the vast majority of people on both sides, who are committed to peace, can unite to root out extremism.

## WHAT IS ISIS?

In the simplest terms, ISIS is an Islamic “state” for those who feel stateless, mainly Sunnis who were cut out of power sharing in Iraq and Syria. In essence, ISIS is so successful because it offers Sunnis a “home.”

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 precipitated an unprecedented shift of power from the minority Sunnis, who had historically led the country, to the Shias. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a highly divisive, sectarian-minded Shia whom I met several times, presided over a reign of terror against Sunnis from 2006 to 2014, including mass arrests and targeting by state-sponsored militias.

In neighboring Syria, on the other hand, Sunnis are the majority, but the ruling elite is Alawite, an offshoot of the Shia sect. Both the current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his father, Hafez al-Assad, promoted Alawites to positions of power and oppressed Sunnis, killing thousands in response to Islamist uprisings in the early 1980s and the Arab Spring protests of 2011.



The Fertile Crescent. Image by “N-Mesopotamia and Syria english” by Goran tek-en/Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

In addition, climate factors have exacerbated Sunnis’ plight and economic woes. Starting in 2006, the Fertile Crescent of Syria and Iraq—where farming first got its start 12,000 years ago—faced the worst three-year drought on record. Researchers have determined that the drought, which caused Sunni farmers to lose their livelihoods and flee to the cities looking for work, was a factor in the violent uprisings that led to the current civil war in Syria, in which 200,000 people have died. “You had a lot of angry, unemployed men helping to trigger a revolution,” explains Aaron Wolf, a water management expert at Oregon State University who frequently visits the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> Capitalizing on the area’s ongoing need for water, ISIS has seized several strategic dams along the Euphrates River and cut water flow to less than 50 percent of normal.<sup>3</sup>

These factors, in combination, turned the Fertile Crescent into fertile ground for an insurgency. Joshua Landis, author of the popular *Syria Comment* blog and director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, summed up the situation this way when we spoke recently: “This giant Sunni sea [of people in the Fertile Crescent] is caught between two very Shiite regimes—feeling bereft, unrepresented, unjustly treated, and badly governed. Plus they have no water or resources. It’s a very skimpy environment to be fending for yourself in. It’s no wonder ISIS conquered the whole thing in one summer.”

What is ISIS, then? ISIS is the entity that is giving Sunnis power, influence, dignity, and a “state” during a time many of them feel abandoned by their own nations. >>

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”

## HISTORY OF ISIS

ISIS, with its theology of violent jihad, is the latest in a line of Islamist groups that began with Sayyid Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s in Egypt. As Landis put it, “Qutb espoused violent jihad as the answer to the security state in the Middle East, and it caught on and became a dominant radical theology.” ISIS is the current incarnation of that theology.

The Islamic State’s leader and self-appointed caliph is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi from the city of Samarra, who got his start as a low-level religious figure in Al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI), part of the broader al-Qa’ida network. AQI was dealt a large blow in 2006, when its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was killed and Sunni tribes, fed up with AQI’s brutal tactics and extremist views, teamed up with an amped-up U.S. military presence (known as “the Surge”) to fight against them.

But as American troops were winding down in Iraq in 2010, AQI resurged under new leadership and with grander ambitions forged in the neighboring fight in Syria. Al-Baghdadi changed the group’s name from Al-Qa’ida in Iraq to the Islamic State and proclaimed himself its caliph after the group first conquered territory in both Syria and Iraq.<sup>4</sup> ISIS’s stated aim is to establish an Islamic caliphate across the Middle East,<sup>5</sup> but it will almost certainly never achieve that goal.

## ISIS’S FOREIGN APPEAL

Just as Sunni marginalization in Iraq and Syria explains the rise and success of ISIS in those areas, a sense of

disempowerment may partly explain its broader international appeal as well. Estimates indicate that nearly 30,000 foreigners have traveled to Syria from more than 100 different countries to support ISIS. Most are from Middle Eastern countries, but at least 4,500 are from Western countries, including over 250 from the United States.

To some of those on the fringes of Western society, ISIS appears to offer all they lack—the glitz and glamour of guns, women, and glory, and the feeling of being part of something big, utopian, and apocalyptic. In recreating the caliphate and portending the end times, replete with battles against the West, ISIS claims paradise on earth and paradise to come.

ISIS’s adept use of social media to peddle its promises also contributes to its success in recruiting disenfranchised foreigners. There’s the violence—horrible images in which hostages have been murdered or ISIS’s adversaries on the battlefield, executed—which sells particularly to those steeped in the jihadist narrative. But ISIS also propagates images of a family-friendly, welcoming life under its rule, hoping to entice those seeking religious and personal fulfillment. And it uses popular culture—referencing trending video games, for example—to connect with disaffected youth and young thrill seekers.

## IS ISLAM THE PROBLEM?

The proliferation of militant groups that profess the Muslim faith has left many wondering if the problem lies with the religion of Islam itself. In response, experts point to non-Muslim movements that have utilized equally medieval tactics to accomplish their goals. “There >>



is little that is novel about ISIS,” writes Stephen M. Walt in *Foreign Affairs*, noting other revolutionary states that espoused violence, such as the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the Maoists in China, and the French during their 1789 Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

As with any religion, the question is one of interpretation—whether one looks through an extremist or moderate lens. Within Islam itself, we find a full range of practices and expressions of belief. On the one side is the mystical and tolerant Sufism, expressed famously in the poetry of Rumi and Hafiz, which emphasizes healing the heart and turning it wholly to God. On the other are the unequivocal Salafis, called Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia, whose traditional interpretation finds expression in a regime that reportedly beheaded nearly twice as many people as ISIS<sup>7</sup> last year and whose policies abroad labor to wipe out more moderate interpretations of Islam.

To call ISIS “not Islamic,” as President Obama did in 2014,<sup>8</sup> is inaccurate. Yet ISIS is not representative of “true Islam” either. Like other fundamentalist movements, ISIS purports to be the original, authentic purveyor of the faith, but it interprets the religious texts through its selective, modern worldview and goals. It cherry-picks ideas and practices from Islam’s texts, focusing on the violent parts and leaving out the more peaceable ones.

The Quran forbids aggression, for example: “And fight in the cause of God those who fight against you, and do not commit aggression. Indeed God does not love those who are aggressors” (Quran, 2:190). But elsewhere,

it seems to sanction violence: “And slay them wherever ye find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution [of Muslims] is worse than slaughter [of non-believers] . . . and fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is for Allah” (Quran, 2:191–193).

Clearly, ISIS discounts the former directive and relies heavily on the latter. Similarly, while ISIS claims to have recreated the caliphate in its original form and says it eschews “moderns,” it does so extremely selectively. For example, ISIS embraces the very modern tool of social media, even though such media clearly had no part in the caliphates of the seventh century.

## DEFEATING ISIS—FORCE IS INSUFFICIENT

If ISIS arose because people felt disempowered, then the best way to defeat ISIS is to empower people. Landis told me, “The only way to defeat ISIS is to provide good governance. We can bomb the heck out of these people and destroy the oil and refineries, but they don’t have any choices because they’re facing a very brutal political structure. The only way [ISIS] will stop is by having a better system of government that actually represents the people.”

Yet, the U.S. is continuing its strategy of catching the drops of water from the leaky faucet—i.e., confronting the group with force. “Regarding ISIS, we have shied away from commitment beyond a military solution,” Dr. Kirklin Bateman, a retired colonel and professor at the College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University in Washington,

DC, told me recently. “We’re not going to call ISIS what it really is—an ‘insurgency’—because then you need a counterinsurgency, which would require state-building and addressing those deeper grievances. It’s safer to stick with drone strikes and targeted operations. We like quick victories with metrics that we can measure and demonstrate success for.”

This might be the safer course of action for our troops and personnel in the short term, but Bateman, and many others, believe it will be ineffective in the long run. Bateman attributes this penchant for “quick victories” to the “American strategic culture,” which, he noted, “is not about investing for the long term in creating functioning societies to address the economic, political, [and] social grievances that are impacting these individuals.”

In Bateman’s view, the time has come for a change to the way we approach foreign entanglements, from halting to fully committed—when that’s what’s called for. “It’s time for average Americans to find our voice and press our leaders to quit piecemealing our response to these groups,” he said. “We either have an obligation as the sole remaining superpower to be a force for good when there is injustice, or we don’t. There is no middle ground.”

Dave Jesmer, a Middle East intelligence expert and former military attaché in several Middle Eastern countries, agrees that a more comprehensive role by the U.S. is critical. “It’s dangerous for Americans to be isolationist,” he said during our interview. “The oceans don’t protect us any longer. 9/11 should have proven that. If we don’t address Arabs’



Each year, on the International Day of Peace (September 21), Principia College's Euphrates Institute chapter invites students to place prayers in the holes of this representation of Jerusalem's Western Wall, where people wedge prayers into chinks in the wall.

basic needs, we're going to be facing this problem for generations. There are rising expectations from the world's greater connectivity through the Internet. They see the opportunities they're kept out of."

## BEYOND MILITARY MIGHT

Across the region—for far more than Sunnis—the Arab world's yearning for better governance is fueling upheaval and unrest, from the Arab Spring to the current Palestinian protests to the allure of the Islamic State's utopian promises. The kind of governance the majority seeks is not an Islamic

caliphate but democracy. Eighty-six percent of Muslims believe democracy is the best form of government, and majorities of Arabs admire the West's political freedoms, democracy, work ethic, and economic progress, according to a study published in the January 2008 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*.<sup>9</sup>

Democracy. Basic needs. Good governance. Empowering the disempowered. These are the only real solutions to ISIS, but they won't be fostered by any drone strike or quick military victory. The military element is critical, especially having enough of a military presence to hamper the capabilities of

militant groups and degrade their operating capacities and ability to expand. But that is just one piece of the puzzle.

We must do more to build fertile ground so that the principles of democracy and accountable government can take root. This will likely mean nation-building—anathema to most Americans, especially after the failed attempt in Iraq. To me, though, it means even more—a wholesale shift in how we approach our foreign relations and the role we play in the world.

I think it's time for a "second front" of widespread citizen involvement to >>



Zuhal Sultan speaking in Wanamaker Hall

## Euphrates Institute 2015 Visionary of the Year Visits Principia

When Zuhal Sultan spoke on both Principia campuses this past fall, students were excited to hear how she founded the National Youth Orchestra of Iraq when she was just a teenager. A pianist, Sultan also gave a concert during Music at Davis at the College.

Prior to her talk on the School campus, Sultan dined with about a dozen Upper School students who peppered her with questions about her life and dreams—and also freely responded to her inquiries about Principia and Christian Science.

Both College and School students were inspired by Sultan's indomitable spirit and message of hope. "A lot of students found it to be a valuable talk," observed one Upper School senior. "Everyone was very engaged . . . it was one of the best required talks yet!"

Just before visiting Principia, Sultan spoke at the United Nations on the International Day of Peace and at the National Defense Institute in Washington, DC. Following her stops at the College and School, Sultan went on to Stanford University, where she spoke in both English and Arabic, and to the Seattle area, where she gave a talk and a concert.

eliminate terrorism and assuage fear. I like the way Benjamin Barber, author of *Jihad vs. McWorld* (Random House, 1996) describes it: "The second front . . . engages every citizen with a stake in democracy and social justice, both within nation-states and in the relations between them. It transforms anxious and passive spectators into resolute and engaged participants . . ." (p. xiv).

In the age of online interconnectedness, the world's citizens no longer need to sit on the sidelines, and truthfully, they can no longer afford to. We must each step up and do our part to support moderates and marginalize extremists. Not all of us can go over to Syria and Iraq and fight terrorists, but we can each amplify the voices of reason that are countering the voices of hate.

For example, the organization I founded, Euphrates Institute, recently honored Zuhal Sultan (pictured on the left), founder and director of the National Youth Orchestra of Iraq, as 2015 Visionary of the Year. Starting the orchestra when she was just 17, Zuhal brought together young people from every religion and ethnic group in Iraq to build bridges through music. The orchestra members overcame incredible obstacles of war, violence, and lack of resources to perform successfully throughout Europe and Iraq, giving people a symbol of hope and accomplishing what no Iraqi politician has been able to do—unite the disparate groups of an Iraq that threatens to splinter apart.

I call Zuhal the "anti-ISIS": whereas that group is recruiting young people from all over the world to divide, terrorize, and sow fear and violence, she

is recruiting young people from all over Iraq to unite, harmonize, and promote tolerance and cooperation.

The Iraqi youth orchestra had to cancel its 2014 tour to the U.S. because of ISIS's takeover and the inability of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad to issue their visas. At that point, Zuhail was ready to disband the orchestra. But following Euphrates' recognition of her and the support she felt during her U.S. tour as Visionary of the Year, she is rededicating herself full time to getting the orchestra back up and running. Zuhail says the more groups like hers that provide culture and beauty, the fewer people who will be swallowed up by ISIS. "We need to be human," says Zuhail. "Music fosters humanity and creativity."

## INVESTING IN EFFECTIVE PEACEMAKING

Zuhail gets no funding from the U.S. government for her work, even though the amount to sustain her orchestra would be miniscule compared to what we're spending on fighting ISIS. The cost of U.S. military operations against ISIS amounts to \$9.4 million per day, according to Pentagon estimates in the summer of 2015, whereas the amount to fund the whole orchestra's music lessons, rehearsals, administration, and tour costs for an entire season is just \$500,000. I long for the days when we match our national pocketbook to funding policies that will achieve the foundational, "second-front" results we desire. We need to press our leaders to focus less on military victories and more on funding grassroots efforts that will bear fruit over the long term.

I'm encouraged by the increasing ability of ordinary citizens to help support

moderate groups on the ground, like Zuhail's orchestra and the dozens of other grassroots organizations and visionary individuals in the region (see sidebar on p. 31). In today's age of connectivity, we can share their stories, spread the word, amplify their voices, and support them directly as donors. And for the intrepid travelers among us, we can volunteer and help on the ground.

Regardless of the avenue, as we focus more on the positive efforts at work and throw our weight behind them, their capacity, success, and sustainability increase. Imagine if there were not just one youth orchestra but many throughout Iraq and Syria, uplifting and inspiring and empowering even more youth in the region.

Maybe defeating extremists means beating them at their own game. While al-Qa'ida and ISIS create cells to terrorize, we can help create cells to harmonize. >>



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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/is-a-lack-of-water-to-blame-for-the-conflict-in-syria-72513729/?no-ist>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-is-waging-a-water-war-in-southern-iraq-2015-6>.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/world/middleeast/us-actions-in-iraq-fueled-rise-of-a-rebel.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/world/middleeast/us-actions-in-iraq-fueled-rise-of-a-rebel.html?_r=2).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/isis-revolutionary-state>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.mintpressnews.com/saudi-arabia-beheads-nearly-twice-as-many-people-as-isis-so-far-this-year/208894/>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isis-1>.

<sup>9</sup> Amaney Jamal and Mark Tessler, "Attitudes in the Arab World," *Journal of Democracy* 19, No. 1 (2008): 97-110.

*One of the many messages of peace promoted by the Euphrates Institute chapter on the College campus*

*Photo by Nathaniel Wilder (C'04)*



# Grassroots Peacemaking in the Middle East

Want to know more about how to support peacekeeping efforts in the Middle East? Here's a sampling of the dozens of organizations making a difference on the ground in Iraq and Syria, in particular.

## **Iraqi Al Amal Association**

[www.iraqi-alamal.org](http://www.iraqi-alamal.org)

Led by Hanaa Edwar, Arab Woman of the Year in 2013, Iraqi Al Amal is a non-political, non-sectarian association of volunteers actively engaged in projects for the benefit and well being of the Iraqi population—regardless of race, gender, or political or religious affiliation.

## **United Religions Initiative (URI)**

[www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org)

The largest global grassroots interfaith network in the world, URI's mission is "to cultivate peace and justice by engaging people to bridge religious and cultural differences and work together for the good of their communities and the world." URI has 744 local groups—called cooperation circles—in over 92 countries, including Iraq and Syria, that are promoting peace through religious cooperation. (The Euphrates Institute is one of URI's cooperation circles in North America.)

## **White Helmets**

[www.whitehelmets.org](http://www.whitehelmets.org)

This organization includes more than 2,200 volunteers in Syria, including a growing number of women, who risk their lives to go into the most dangerous

places and environments in the country to save their fellow Syrian citizens from the rubble of bombings and civil war.

They are known by their white helmets—construction helmets that serve as their only protection in what is sometimes still an active bombing zone. The group has saved over 12,000 people, and more than 80 of their members have been killed in the line of duty, according to a *New York Times* Opinion piece (Nicholas Kristof, "Unpaid, Unarmed Lifesavers in Syria," Feb. 15, 2015). Since its members are not paid, armed, or politically aligned, the organization has been able to work across lines of government forces and militias, including ISIS.

## **Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI)**

[www.owfi.info/EN](http://www.owfi.info/EN)

Led by Yanar Mohammed, OWFI sets up safe houses and shelters for women in a conflict environment and parochial, abusive society. Focused in the Kurdistan region, the organization is building a shelter in northern Iraq to house Yezidi women who are fleeing from or were abused by ISIS. Services include armed protection, safe dwellings, and legal services. More recently, the organization has extended its influence to international locations that have attracted masses of Iraqi refugees. ■