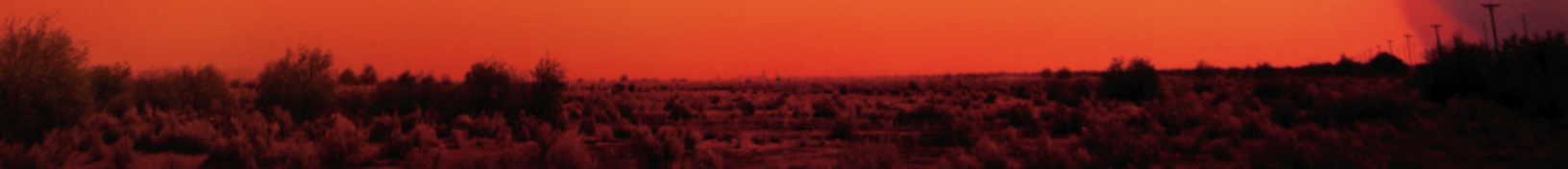
THE NEW THREAT

FROM ISLAMIC MILITANCY

JASON BURKE

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
AL-QAEDA AND *THE 9/11 WARS*



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ABOUT THE BOOK

In *The New Threat* renowned expert and prize-winning reporter Jason Burke provides the clearest and most comprehensive guide to Islamic militancy today.

From Syria to Somalia, from Libya to Indonesia, from Yemen to the capitals of Europe, Islamic militancy appears stronger, more widespread and more threatening than ever. ISIS and other groups, such as Boko Haram, together command significant military power, rule millions and control extensive territories. Elsewhere Al-Qaeda remains potent and is rapidly evolving. Factions and subsidiaries proliferate worldwide, and a new generation of Western Jihadists are emerging, joining conflicts abroad and attacking at home. Who are these groups and what do they actually want? What connects them and how do they differ? How are we to understand their tactics of online activism and grotesque violence?

Drawing on almost two decades of frontline reporting as well as a vast range of sources, from intelligence officials to the militants themselves, renowned expert Jason Burke cuts through the mass of opinion and misinformation to explain dispassionately and with total clarity the nature of the threat we now face. He shows that Islamic militancy has changed dramatically in recent years. Far from being a ‘medieval’ throwback, it is modern, dynamic and resilient. Despite everything, it is entirely comprehensible.

The New Threat is essential reading if we are to understand our fears rather than succumb to them, to act rationally and effectively, and to address successfully one of the most urgent problems of our time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

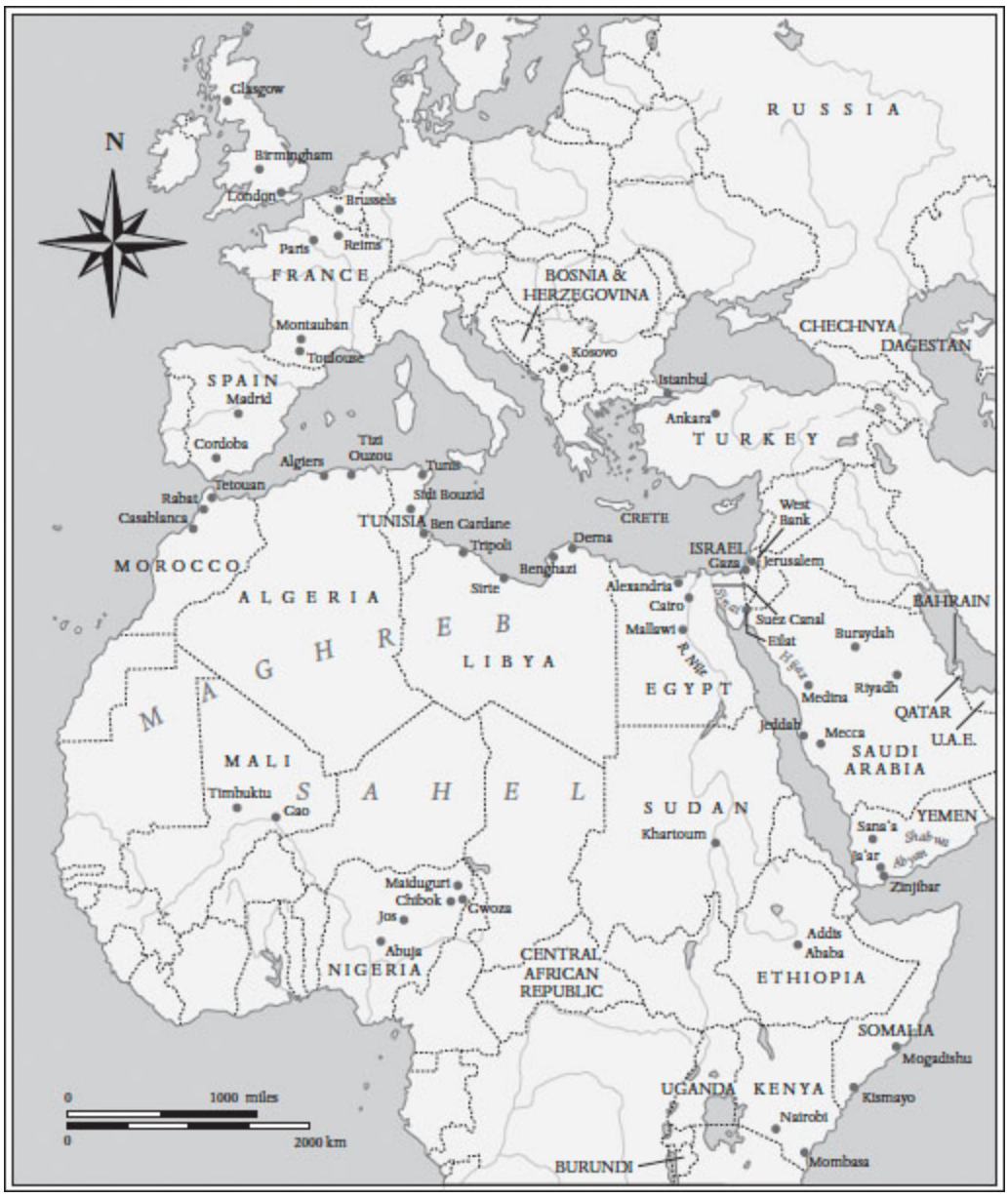
Jason Burke has been one of the foremost front-line reporters on Islamic militancy for almost two decades, reporting from throughout the Middle East and South Asia. His bestselling book *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* overturned a multitude of misconceptions about Islamic extremism and rapidly established itself as the most accurate, readable and expert account of the phenomenon. His most recent book, *The 9/11 Wars*, was described as ‘essential for understanding the past decade’ (*Sunday Times*). His books have been translated into twelve languages. He is currently south Asia correspondent for the *Guardian*.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Al-Qaeda:
The True Story of Radical Islam

On the Road to Kandahar:
Travels through Conflict in the Islamic World

The 9/11 Wars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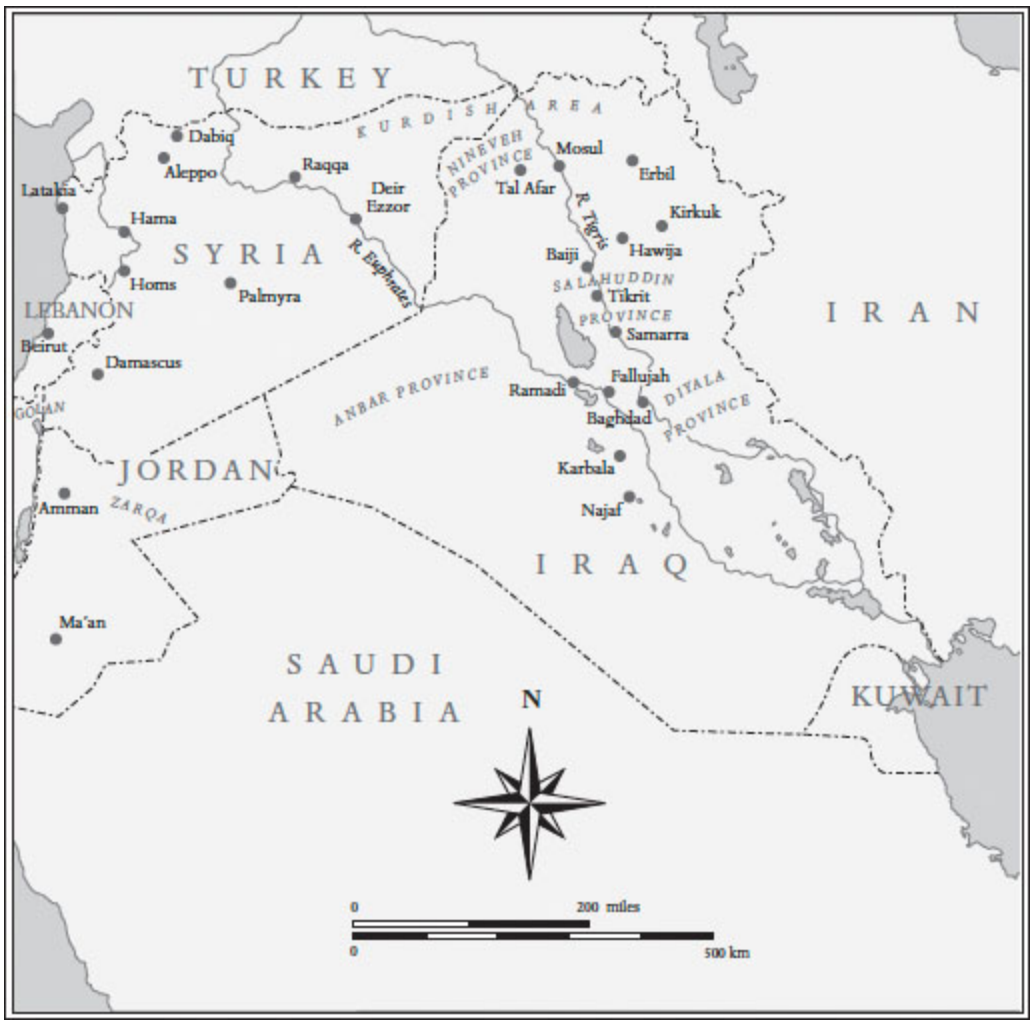
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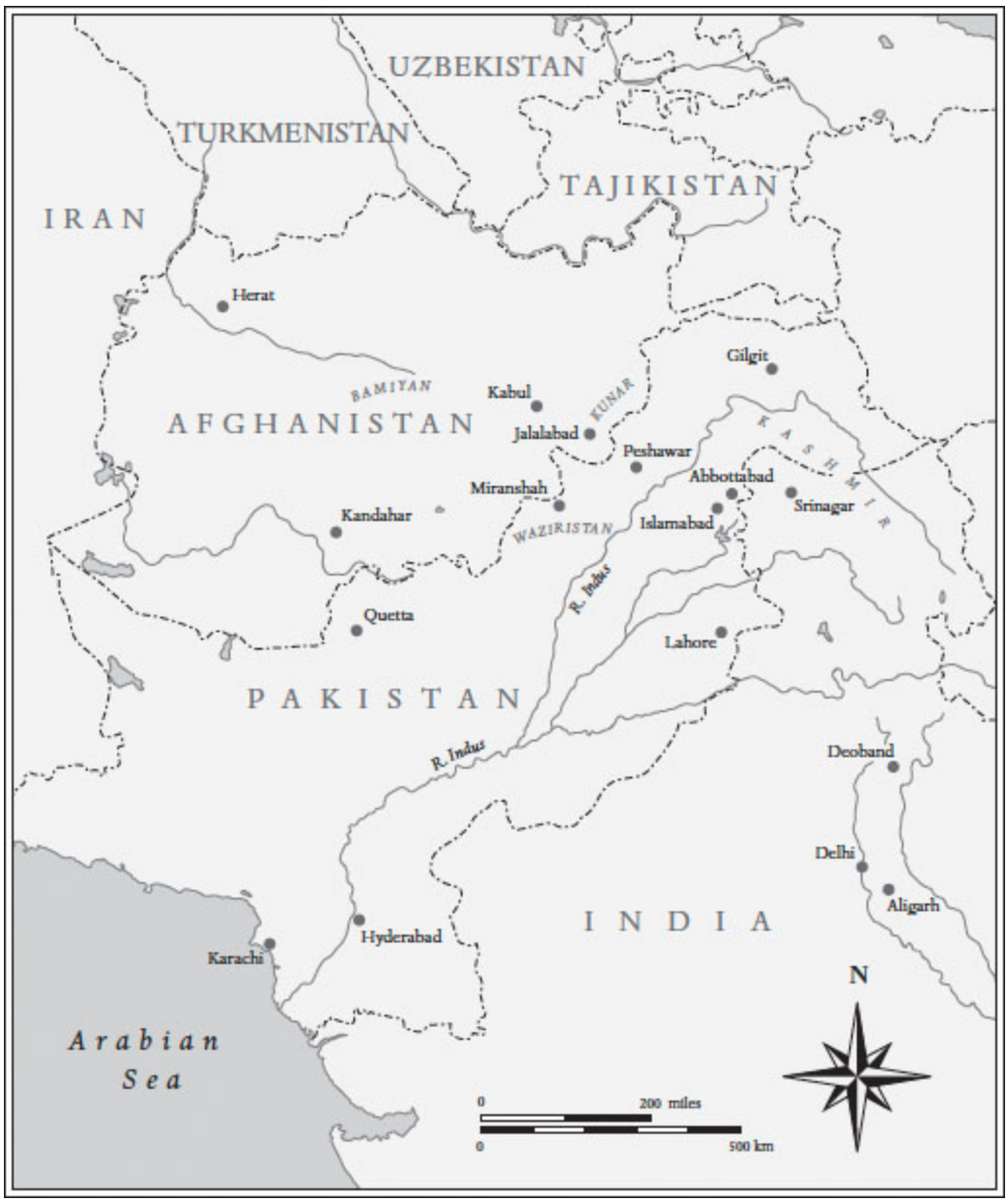
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For Clara,
and her great-grandmothers

The New Threat

From Islamic Militancy

Jason Burke

THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

INTRODUCTION

NO ONE WAS quite sure who was in charge of Mosul in the early summer of 2014. During the day, government security forces maintained a tenuous hold, but at nightfall they ceded the streets, squares and battered neighbourhoods of Iraq's second city to others.

Mosul, the capital of Nineveh province, had long been a trouble spot, even as far back as the immediate aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. As a bastion of Iraq's Sunni Muslim minority, it maintained a tradition of support for Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime. The deposed dictator's two sons had taken refuge there, and Sunni militants had briefly seized control of it in 2004. The presence of many tightly knit military families and a long history of exposure to extremist religious ideologies combined with ethnic tensions and a complex tribal tapestry made the city of one million inhabitants a problem.

So when on the morning of 8 June Atheel Nujaifi, the governor of Nineveh, had a meeting with US officials, it took place in Erbil, a city dominated by Iraq's Kurdish minority sixty miles away. Mosul was deemed much too dangerous for Americans to visit. Indeed, it was increasingly dangerous even for the governor.

Nujaifi, appointed five years earlier, had alarming news.[1] Over the previous three days hundreds of armed pickup trucks carrying Islamic extremist fighters had crossed the nearby border from Syria, which had been embroiled for more than three years in a brutal civil war. Having driven through the lawless tracts of scrubby desert to the west of Mosul, this sizeable force of Sunni militants was now

assembled on the outskirts of the city. The Iraqi Army, controlled directly by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and almost exclusively Shia, had agreed to provide assistance, but no one in Baghdad, the Iraqi capital 270 miles to the south, seemed to appreciate the urgency of the situation and reinforcements might not arrive for a week.

As the Americans scrambled to assemble some kind of response, it became clear that events had overtaken them. Extremists had begun moving into Mosul more than forty-eight hours before.[2] There had been no mass assault and only a few hundred fighters were engaged at any one time but clashes had taken place across much of the sprawling city.[3] A massacre of policemen had prompted mass desertions, and a bid by government forces to clear outlying suburbs had failed. Tribal militias and local groups once loyal to Saddam had also joined the fighting, and a series of carefully targeted raids on jails freed hundreds who immediately swelled the militants' ranks. In Baghdad, though, senior government officials had rejected an offer from Kurdish leaders to send their own forces into the city and reassured the US officials that Mosul was not under serious threat.

The full weight of the militant offensive came to bear, however, three days after the initial assault began. The few hundred fighters who had first infiltrated the city had by now become a force of between 1,500 and 2,000 as sympathisers rallied to their black flags in increasing numbers. A massive car bomb broke resistance at a crucial defensive position around an old hotel, almost entirely eliminating any organised resistance to the militants in the parts of Mosul west of the river Tigris. On 9 June, Nujaifi made a televised appeal to the people of the city, calling on them to form self-defence groups, stand their ground and fight. Hours later he fled, narrowly escaping from the provincial headquarters as police held off hundreds of militants armed with rocket-propelled grenades, sniper rifles

and heavy-vehicle-mounted machine guns. Most of the senior military commanders had already deserted, and the two divisions of underequipped, undertrained Iraqi troops supposedly defending the city, totalling around 15,000 men on paper but perhaps only a half or a third of that in reality, disintegrated.

A small group of militants had routed a force of regular soldiers that was between three and ten times more numerous, itself part of an army of 350,000 on which somewhere between $24 billion and $41.6 billion, mainly US aid, had been spent over the previous three years.[4] In scenes reminiscent of the US-led invasion of 2003, thousands of army soldiers dumped their weapons, stripped off their uniforms and ran. Several hundred were captured, and some were made to lie down in hastily dug trenches on the outskirts of the city and were shot. Soon Mosul's airport, its military airfield, banks, TV station, a major army base equipped with enormous quantities of weapons, munitions and US-supplied equipment were all in militant hands. By the afternoon, the battle for the city was over.

'We can't beat them,' one Iraqi Army officer said as he fled. 'They're like ghosts: they appear, strike and disappear in seconds.'[5]

There was worse to come. After securing Mosul, the militants pushed on south, through the dry farmland either side of Highway One, seizing the oil refineries at Baiji and Tikrit, the home town of the late Saddam Hussein, on 11 June. They had moved so fast that government forces had no time to flee. At Camp Speicher, a former US base on the outskirts of Tikrit, over a thousand men, mostly soldiers and air force cadets, surrendered without a fight after being promised safe passage. Mobile phone footage shows a column of hundreds being marched out of the city. Others were forced into trucks and driven to the banks of the Tigris. There, at least 150 were executed. First they were forced into lines, blindfolded and wrists bound, each man taking

the shirt of the man in front between his teeth. Then, in threes, they were forced to kneel. Further footage, filmed by the militants themselves, shows men killing with appalling nonchalance, one holding an assault rifle to victims' heads one-handed before squeezing the trigger, walking slowly from one to the next, another shooting a succession of men in the head with a handgun, sending their bodies toppling into the river in a scene reminiscent of an abattoir. The executions continued for three days. Between five hundred and eight hundred deaths were confirmed by human rights organisations, with the overall toll reaching possibly twice that figure. Designed to terrorise local opponents and the international community, the killings, like the decapitation of Western hostages a few weeks later, sent a very simple message: We are not like any other group before. We will do what no others have been prepared to do. We will go further than all others have gone. Fear us. Respect us. We are al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fil 'Iraq wa al-Sham, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.[6]

The four-day campaign in June 2014 was unprecedented in the annals of violent Islamic extremism. Militants had seized cities before. Some, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and al-Shabaab in Somalia, had even managed to bring significant swathes of territory under their control. But none had taken on a state's army in this way, nor acted with such speed or astonishing efficacy. Hasty appraisals of the attack on Mosul as 'opportunistic' were rapidly revised as intelligence analysts and experts recognised a reality that had escaped them over previous months: that the campaign had been meticulously prepared over two years or more. First, raids had been mounted to break militant leaders out of prisons, simultaneously undermining faith in the ability of local authorities to keep order. These culminated in an assault which freed several hundred veteran militants from the notorious Abu Ghraib prison on the outskirts of Baghdad. Then carefully targeted violence,

ranging from mass-casualty suicide bombing to individual assassination, was combined with widespread use of social media in a bid to degrade the morale of government forces. Senior government officials in Mosul itself were assassinated or forced into exile, allowing the militants to establish a shadow administration in the city and its surroundings. An offensive was launched to secure rear areas in Syria, give new fighters combat experience and to hone tactics. Raids were stepped up on the outskirts of the city to degrade any remaining defences. Finally, a combination of military operations at a tactical level and strategic alliances with local communities or other insurgent groups prepared the ground for the actual assault. If their initial successes took the attackers by surprise, they were ready and able to exploit them ruthlessly.

The militants pushed some way beyond Tikrit but by midsummer a front had stabilised, broadly along the divide between majority Sunni and majority Shia zones in Iraq. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria now controlled a major city, two or three smaller ones, dozens of towns, oilfields, banks, courts and stocks of conventional weaponry including tanks and artillery, all in the heart of one of the most strategically important bits of real estate on the planet. Around seven million people spread over an area the size of England stretching across eastern Syria and north-western Iraq lay under their putative authority.[7] Carefully produced propaganda videos portrayed a proto-state of an extent, apparent organisation and, above all, audacity not seen for generations. Shortly after taking control of Mosul, the leader of the militants, Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri al-Hussein al-Samarrai, better known by his nom de guerre of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the foundation of an entirely new entity: al-Dawla al-Islamiya, the Islamic State.

He then went even further, announcing in an audio recording, released in five languages, that he had assumed the role of caliph, leader of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims,

with Mosul as the re-established caliphate's seat. There had been no caliph since 1924 when the institution had been abolished in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This was a stunning statement of ambition and intent, an apparently concrete step to realising the ultimate dream of three generations of Islamic extremists. And, for its supporters, it was a prelude to a new golden age that would unite the world's Muslims under a single authority and restore the community to the position of dominance it had lost over the previous five centuries. To make sure the message was fully understood, IS uploaded a video entitled 'Breaking the Borders' which showed a bulldozer breaching the sand barrier demarcating the Syria–Iraq border, drawn by former colonial powers in 1916. The dominance of the West had been broken, the images announced. The Islamic State's motto was '*baqiyah wa-tata-mmadad*', meaning remain and expand. As summer turned to autumn, there was little to indicate it would not do both.

The seizure of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, in June 2014 by the Islamic State was the most significant single event involving Muslim militants anywhere in the world since the attacks on New York and Washington thirteen years before. The strikes of 9/11 brought a new type of terrorism to the world's attention, one that had in fact been emerging, largely unremarked outside of specialist circles, during the 1990s. The fall of Mosul revealed that an equally dramatic transformation of Islamic extremism had been taking place since 2001. The Islamic State's success, broadcast by social and mainstream media, galvanised aspirant extremists in a way not seen since the immediate aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, or even the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. It prompted thousands of young men and women from around the Islamic world and the West to leave their homes and travel to Syria. Leaders from Algeria to Pakistan pledged allegiance

to the Islamic State, declaring pockets of territory ‘liberated land’.

Simultaneously, other groups, including al-Qaeda, appeared to be intensifying their activities. In one month alone, November 2014, around 5,000 people died in violence linked to Islamic militants worldwide.[8] In December, a group killed 132 children aged between eight and eighteen in an attack on a military school in Pakistan. A month later in Paris, three gunmen shot dead seventeen people, including eight members of the editorial staff of a satirical magazine that had printed cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. The killers claimed allegiance to an al-Qaeda affiliate in Yemen and the Islamic State. That same week several hundred died in a raid on a village in north-eastern Nigeria by the movement known as Boko Haram, a name which roughly translates as ‘No to Western Education’.

Every incident underlined that, despite the death of Osama bin Laden, despite huge expenditure of blood and treasure, and despite new laws and enhanced powers for security services, Islamic militancy has not been beaten. Instead, a threat faced by the West for more than twenty years has entered an alarming new phase. If anything it appears more frightening than ever. Why? Why does Islamic extremism not only endure but seem to be spreading? Why does its violence and utopian message appeal to so many? How real is the danger it poses? Why is the phenomenon so extraordinarily resilient? How will it evolve in the decades to come?

This book suggests some answers to these questions. It describes the nature of Islamic militancy today and the threat it poses now and is likely to pose in the future. Its scope is broad, in the belief that it is impossible to counter a threat without fully understanding its history and the environment that produced it. This means that in the pages that follow I try to explain the long-term roots of Islamic militancy in the Muslim world and, crucially, the Muslim

world’s sometimes troubled relationship with the West. I will also attempt to describe the situation on the ground – the lived reality of violence – for communities and nations worldwide, for extremists and those who resist them. In doing so, I hope to reveal the economic, social, cultural and political factors that can feed, or indeed starve, extremism.

I first travelled to the Middle East in 1991 while still at university, for an ill-advised if adventurous spell alongside the Kurdish peshmerga fighters who had just begun to carve out their autonomous enclave in the north of Iraq under the protection of Western air power. My weeks among these extraordinary men at such a momentous time was the beginning of a deep fascination. It led to a journey which has taken me through the offices of Taliban administrators, the homes of the bereaved families of suicide bombers in Gaza, Kashmir and Afghanistan, through interviews with militants in cells and in training camps, in cafes on sunlit squares and grubby safe houses down dark alleys, conversations with spies of varying seniority and reliability, and discussions with ideologues of many extremist organisations, some violent, some less so. It has taken me through the heart of several major conflicts and many minor ones. In writing this book, I have drawn on the experience, personal and professional, of reporting on Islamic militancy over a twenty-year period, during which I have lived in or visited almost every country affected by the phenomenon, from Morocco’s Atlantic seaboard to Indonesia’s islands, from the East End of London to China’s western provinces.

This work focuses on those organisations and processes which pose the greatest threat to London, New York and Paris today – this is what concerns most readers, understandably – but one of its recurring themes is how impossible it is to distinguish between Islamic militancy that affects us domestically and the phenomenon as it manifests itself worldwide. We should be aware, though, that the number of those in the West who have died in international

acts of terrorism, including the nearly 3,000 killed in the 9/11 attacks, is only a fraction of the total of those who have died in the Islamic world from violence related to extremism. From 2001 to 2011 around 250,000 people were killed in what, in my last book, I called the '9/11 wars', that series of interlinked conflicts exacerbated, catalysed or provoked by the strikes on New York and Washington.[9] Though the vast majority of casualties were Muslims, all faith communities suffered. Few in Europe or the US are aware of the second most murderous terrorist attack in the last several decades: multiple suicide bombings directed by a previous incarnation of the Islamic State against the Yazidi minority in northern Iraq in 2007, which killed more than eight hundred and injured twice as many.[10]

From 2011 to 2015, the total was even greater. A study released in May 2015 by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies estimated that while fifty-five armed conflicts had led to 49,000 fatalities across the world in 2010, 180,000 people had died in forty-two conflicts in 2014. The vast proportion of the deaths were in conflicts involving Islamic extremists though not all, clearly, were killed by the militants themselves. Only a tiny fraction of the total casualties were in developed countries. James Clapper, US director of National Intelligence, said, with 13,000 attacks killing more than 30,000 people, 2014 was likely to be 'the most lethal year for global terrorism' in the forty-five years the statistics have been kept.[11]

Yet, investigating the specific danger to the West, however parochial or self-centred that may seem, is still important, not least because the reaction of the West in terms of policy and intervention in the Islamic world is so crucial to the evolution of Islamic militancy. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a series of misconceptions about those responsible – bin Laden and al-Qaeda – became widely accepted. Some focused on the person of bin Laden himself – his wealth, health, history. Others contributed to a warped

understanding of the organisation that he led. Al-Qaeda, until then a relatively marginal group with no real support base and only a few hundred members, was portrayed as a sprawling global terrorist organisation, with obedient ‘operatives’ and ‘sleeper cells’ on every continent, and an ability to mobilise, radicalise and attack far beyond its real capacities. Historic incidents with no connection to the group or its leader were suddenly recast as ‘al-Qaeda operations’. Any incident anywhere in the world could become an al-Qaeda attack. The threat posed by the group was described in apocalyptic terms. Its ideological motivations were systematically ignored while the individual agency of its leaders was emphasised. If they were killed, the logic went, the problem would disappear. Al-Qaeda’s links with other terrorist or extremist organisations were distorted, often by political leaders who hoped for domestic gain and international support. So too were supposed links – all imaginary – to the governments of several states. One result was the ‘global war on terror’, a monumentally misconceived strategy which is in part to blame for the spread of radical Islamic militancy over the last decade.

Despite the lessons learned over the years, and the very different approach of political leaders in the US and Europe, there is a new danger that at least some of those mistakes will be repeated.[12] The emergence of the Islamic State (IS) prompted popular reactions that resemble those in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and which, despite the generally sensible analysis of the administration of Barack Obama, risk influencing policy. ‘They will open the gates of hell to spill out on the world,’ said one right-wing US politician of IS after the fall of Mosul.[13] The atmosphere in Europe following the attacks in Paris of January 2015 also recalled that of a decade earlier, with the same hysterical claims of ‘no-go zones’ in European cities where Islamic law had supposedly been imposed.[14] IS, despite no real evidence, was linked to plans to acquire weapons of mass

destruction as well as, ludicrously, to send Ebola-infected ‘operatives’ against its enemies. Media in the US reported a network of IS ‘sleeper cells’ in the ‘homeland’, and ‘sleeper agents’ in Europe, exactly as they had with al-Qaeda in 2002. These claims were, at best, a gross misrepresentation of how either organisation operates and how individuals are radicalised.[15]

IS has also been linked, and sometimes deliberately conflated, with an extraordinary range of global ‘bad guys’, ranging from Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic extremist organisation, to Mexican drug cartels.[16] If early analysis ignored the importance of ideology for al-Qaeda in the Islamic world, current analysis of IS misses the centrality of its bid to restore the lost power and glory of Islamic empires and the resonance of that project with many in the Middle East and beyond. Obama, explaining how his administration would ‘degrade and ultimately destroy’ IS, described the enemy as ‘a terrorist organization, pure and simple’.[17] This is just not true. IS in particular is a hybrid of insurgency, separatism, terrorism and criminality with deep roots in its immediate local environment, in broader regional conflicts and in geopolitical battles that link what happens in Raqqa or Mosul to chancelleries in capitals across much of Asia and the West.

In 2015, governments rushed to stiffen counter-terrorist legislation and increase police powers, just as they had in 2002. Then and now, the efforts to reinforce legal powers of security agencies and curtail the freedoms of citizens were accompanied by statements from policymakers describing the threat in blood-curdling terms. Theresa May, the British home secretary, said in November 2014 that ‘the threat we face is now more dangerous *than at any time before or since 9/11*’. This was an extraordinary and misleading statement.[18] As with al-Qaeda, successive leaders around the world have systematically exaggerated the involvement of IS in local violence in their own countries to obscure their

own failings, or those of their forebears, and to obtain material, diplomatic and moral support in Washington.

There is another problem, also tenacious, which is resurfacing. My first book, which specifically focused on al-Qaeda, was largely devoted to showing that there was more to Islamic militancy than just bin Laden and his group, however devastating the strikes in New York and Washington might have been. There is now a danger that IS begins to be seen as encompassing all of Islamic militancy today, as al-Qaeda was once thought to do. IS is not 'the new al-Qaeda', even if the older group has declined substantially and lost its dominant position among extremist organisations. IS may have inspired other groups, re-energised the global militant movement and pioneered new strategies and tactics that have so far been extremely effective, but there are still many other important players we should be taking into account. In the eighteen months or so before the summer of 2014, when IS captured the world's attention, extremists had raided a Western-run gas refinery in Algeria, captured and briefly held Timbuktu, bombed the Boston Marathon, beheaded an off-duty soldier on the streets of London, killed scores in an upmarket shopping mall in Kenya and kidnapped two hundred schoolgirls in Nigeria. Each of these attacks was dramatically different. If two involved so-called 'lone wolves', three were the work of a major organisation; if some were clearly aimed at capturing global attention, others were driven primarily by a local agenda; the group behind the Kenya attack was under huge pressure; those behind the Nigeria kidnapping and the seizure of Timbuktu were surging to prominence. And these were just the most spectacular operations. Many others received little global attention. A significant number of these took place in Afghanistan and Pakistan, two theatres of violent activism which were being rapidly consigned to the margins of world affairs as international troops moved out of one and policymakers' attention moved away from the

other.[19] In Syria itself, of course, IS has no monopoly on Islamic extremist violence, though it would like to establish one. The point is a basic one. Islamic militancy remains a very diverse phenomenon which will not be destroyed by the elimination of a single group, still less an individual. The idea that some kind of silver bullet exists is attractive, and deeply reassuring, but sadly without foundation.

One reason we are so tempted to aggregate, and to simplify, is that the complex reality of Islamic militancy often appears mystifying. It is easier to blame fanaticism, or decide that a particular religion is inherently violent or belligerent, than to carefully unpick the multiple causes, the many strands, the constant evolution of a major ideological and social movement. During the Cold War, communism was similarly reduced to a simplistic caricature, often underpinned by certainties about the essential nature of the Russians. For some in the 1970s and 80s, all terrorism – left-wing and right-wing, ethnic or nationalist – around the world was the work of the KGB. Of course analysis depends on generalisation, but there is a danger that in ignoring complexity the overall picture becomes deeply misleading.

In the pages that follow I try to be selective rather than simplistic. I describe a number of more recent acts of violence in detail, but mention many others in passing. Similarly, I focus on those groups I feel are most significant, leaving aside, with some regret, numerous fascinating features of the current landscape of Islamic militancy. The main concern of the book is on extremism from within the Sunni majority tradition, as the direct threat to Europe or the US from groups within Islam’s minority Shia strand is currently negligible. Palestinian groups based in the West Bank or Gaza are also marginal to the primary thrust of this narrative as their focus remains almost exclusively local and their extremism has very different historical and cultural roots. Local groups in South Asia and those in the Far East

receive less space than they deserve simply because they too currently pose much less of a direct threat to the West.

One guiding principle has been to choose examples that demonstrate the fallacy of one particular misconception – the one that is perhaps the biggest obstacle to a genuine understanding of the problem. Many believe that Islamic militancy represents some kind of regressive historical riptide that is in opposition to the onward march of human progress. This is wrong-headed, complacent and dangerous. Extremism is not 'medieval', as politicians often say, echoing the dismissive, uncomprehending ignorance of their nineteenth-century predecessors when confronted with a similar wave of violence.[20] Nor are its leaders 'temporally perverse', as one commentator memorably described Osama bin Laden.[21] They may be distant in terms of morality or values but they are not distant in time or place. They do not exist in some kind of other world. Rather, Islamic militancy is fundamentally, profoundly contemporary, a product of the same global interaction of politics, economics, culture, technology and social organisation that affects us all. It is of its time, which is now, created and shaped by its environment, which is here. When Islamic militant groups do not keep pace, they fade from the scene. Those that manage the challenges and exploit the opportunities of our fast-changing world thrive. Islamic militants use social media because we all use social media; they seek resources, from money and territory to hydrocarbons and weaponry, in the way that many actors do across the world today, whether formally recognised within the international system of states and multilateral institutions or not; they multi-task as terrorists, insurgents and administrators because we all now play roles which are increasingly ill-defined; they exploit and are formed by the dramatic disruption that digital technology and the Internet has brought; they 'swarm' people and resources rapidly and efficiently because they can now in a way that was never

possible before; for many of them, financing is effectively crowd-sourced from donors, often via the Internet in a way that would be recognisable to any entrepreneurial start-up anywhere in the world. The phenomenon of Islamic militancy is diverse, dynamic, fragmented and chaotic – like so many other forces which shape our lives today. The shift within the phenomenon from hierarchical structures to flatter ones, from vertical to interconnected, from top-down to 'peer to peer', does not simply reflect that of the wider world: it is an integral part of it. Indeed, violent extremists are not just a product of broader trends, they often anticipate them. The Islamic State's new vision of 'pop-up caliphates' scattered across continents but all loyal to a single leader and a single political entity appears much more 'modern' than the increasingly outdated idea that states are defined by the possession of contiguous territory. As successive generations of terrorists have shown, extremists are frequently ahead of the curve, not behind it.[22] Through looking at them, we can learn something of ourselves and, for good or bad, of our future.

In the end, though, this book is primarily about individuals, about their stories, and how they, directly or indirectly, come to inflict great pain and suffering on other individuals. Islamic militants do extraordinary, immoral, appalling things but often remain very ordinary themselves. To counter the threat such people pose we need to comprehend them: their motivations, their objectives and their twisted world view. Trying to understand does not imply any sympathy. It simply means we need to set aside our very natural anger, disgust and fear in order, as dispassionately as possible, to learn. We need, above all, to avoid the trap that the extremists have fallen into: that of shutting ourselves off, of closing our minds, of succumbing to the temptation of wilful ignorance. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks, victims, the maimed and the bereaved, always ask a very fundamental, very human question: 'Why

did this happen?’ We owe it to them to make the effort it takes to find the answer.

1

THE RISE OF ISLAMIC MILITANCY

SURVEY THE NEW landscape of violent Islamic militancy and the immediate impression is of an impenetrable chaos. There are scores of groups who all apparently subscribe to the same basic principles of Islamic extremism but who have different names, are based in different places, and have apparently different priorities, tactics and strategies. By one count there are thirty-three individual militant groups in Pakistan alone.[1]

In the appalling violence in Syria, there are hundreds of 'brigades' of fighters who are Islamic militants by most definitions.[2] There are two Talibans, each of which is split into a multitude of different factions. There is al-Qaeda, of course, and then a bewildering array of its supposed affiliates, most of which operate with varying degrees of autonomy and most of which are, predictably, fractured themselves. Then there is the Islamic State, with a whole new range of connections. There are freelancers, lone wolves, stray dogs, self-starters, clean-skins, leaderless networks, cells and even 'groupuscules', all of which apparently have the power to cause harm, though whether greater or lesser is sometimes unclear. There is virtual militancy online, real militancy offline. None of this is static and the evolution of Islamic militancy is neither linear nor uniform. All is in constant flux.

But we can still make sense of this apparent chaos and confusion. Actors within contemporary Islamic militancy can still be divided into three broad categories.[3] The first is that of the major groups, of which there are only two.

Al-Qaeda was founded more than twenty-five years ago by Osama bin Laden, the Saudi-born propagandist and organiser, in Pakistan, where most of its remaining senior leadership is probably still based. Emerging from the chaos of the last years of the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupiers and their local auxiliaries, the group's goal was to unite and focus the disparate elements of the fractious, parochial, squabbling extremist movement in order to bring radical reform of society, states and religious practice in the Middle East, primarily, and beyond. During the early 1990s, bin Laden, the son of a wealthy construction tycoon, had little idea of how to reach that goal but by the end of the decade, from a base in Afghanistan, had decided that attacks on the US would be the most effective strategy. Strikes against the 'Far Enemy', the US and its allies, would take the place of campaigns against the 'Near Enemy', the local regimes in the Islamic world, including in bin Laden's native land, which he regarded as primarily responsible for the myriad problems facing Muslims everywhere. Bin Laden and a small group of close associates went on to orchestrate several of the most important terrorist operations in recent decades, including the one which is arguably the most spectacular in centuries, which on 11 September 2001 killed 3,000 people and destroyed the iconic twin towers of the World Trade Center, one of New York's most distinctive landmarks, as well as badly damaging the Pentagon, the home of the US Defense Department. Though al-Qaeda is now undoubtedly very much diminished compared to a decade ago, it has nonetheless repeatedly proved itself tenacious and resilient, with significant powers of regeneration. Its current leader, the veteran Egyptian militant Ayman al-Zawahiri, is a pragmatist who lacks bin

Laden's talent for or interest in public relations and has adjusted the strategy of targeting the 'Far Enemy' to have a greater focus on the 'Near Enemy'. He has, however, frequently reaffirmed his and his organisation's desire to kill large numbers of Westerners, in Europe, the US and around the world, and continues to make considerable efforts to do so. Al-Zawahiri, with a small number of remaining veteran militants and a large number of newer recruits, heads 'al-Qaeda central' – also known as 'old al-Qaeda' or 'al-Qaeda senior leadership', AQSL in the acronym-ridden world of counter-terrorism.

The challenger for pre-eminence in the world of Islamic militancy is of course the Islamic State. There are, naturally, many similarities between the two groups. The rivalry between them can usefully be compared with that between top football teams who have different styles, visions and cultures but play the same sport. Both clearly share much in terms of world view and values. Both are led by individuals who demand absolute obedience, though they rarely get it. Both have resources to distribute – money, expertise, opportunity for combat experience or training, safe havens, communications capabilities – and can provide access to further streams of funding or recruitment. Both have established and respected names, or 'brands'. Both provide a psychological focus for anyone who is drawn towards extremist violence, even many thousands of miles away, who needs and wants to feel part of something bigger. They are the two largest nodes in the vast network of networks which constitutes modern Islamic militancy.

But when looked at more closely, IS and al-Qaeda differ enormously. There is a deep personal animosity between their leaders – al-Baghdadi has repeatedly made a point of explicitly repudiating the authority of al-Zawahiri and claiming to be the true inheritor of the legacy of bin Laden. The Islamic State has explicitly rejected the 'Far Enemy' strategy and has prioritised the struggle against the 'Near