

The Islamic State Origins, Goals, and Future Implications

The Eurasia Center
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On Sunday June 29th, 2014, the first day of the holy month of Ramadan, the extremist group ISIS announced the restoration of the Caliphate and the renaming of its group to the **Islamic State (IS)**.¹ This declaration was made by official ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani via a publicly released audio message. The newly established Islamic State has made major appropriations in Iraq, including the capture of major cities, oil refineries, weapons and military armaments, and a reported \$425 million.



Proving to be a capable sub-state actor, the Islamic State presents a significant challenge to the stability of the Middle East region. This Eurasia Center brief will explain the origins of the Islamic State, its intentions, the elements attributing to its recent success, scenarios for US involvement, and the implications for its future in Iraq and Syria.

Origins

To understand the origins of the the **Islamic State (IS)**, it is necessary to become familiar with the current state of al-Qaeda. Today, there no longer exists one centralized al-Qaeda group that the world once faced post-September 11th, 2001. Rather, al-Qaeda is a string of affiliated groups across the Middle East and Africa with varying degrees of capability and commitment to the al-Qaeda mission, weighing heavily on local agendas.² This brief will not belabor you on who these groups are, where they operate, and where their commitments lie. However, it is important to note that as a result of the proliferation of these groups the core al-Qaeda leadership within Afghanistan/Pakistan known as **al-Qaeda Central (AQC)** has had difficulty in maintaining an active influence in the jihadist world.

That being said, IS originated from **al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)** during the multilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003, where thousands of foreign fighters rushed to fight the American "crusaders". As time went on, AQI adopted a new alias as the **Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)** in 2006 to attract recruitment and to reflect one of the original goals of al-Qaeda: to establish a transnational Islamic caliphate ruled by sharia law.³ With the recent 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, many ISI fighters saw an auspicious opportunity in Syria to carve out its long desired Islamic state. The current leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the organization's expansion into Syria on April 9th, 2013 when he announced the merging of **Jabhat al-Nusra** and ISI to form the **Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/the Levant (ISIS)**.⁴



"It's now time to declare in front of the people of the Levant and world that the al Nusra Front is but an extension of the Islamic State of Iraq and part of it..."

"We laid for them plans, and drew up for them the policy of work, and gave them what financial support we could every month, and supplied them with men who had known the battlefields of jihad, from the emigrants and the natives"⁵

Jabhat al-Nusra, or the al-Nusra Front, is an organically grown extremist organization within Syria that derived from old cadres of AQI, but has since remerged in Syria's 2011 uprisings to become al-Qaeda's preferred affiliate within the region.⁶ The leader of al-Nusra responded to Baghdadi's announcement by denying any notions of a merger and reiterating its allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁷ Furthermore Zawahiri, who had become the leader of AQC following the death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011, openly rebutted the merger of al-Nusra and ISI. In a June 2013 letter to Baghdadi, Zawahiri noted that he was not consulted, nor informed of such a merger and requested the dissolution of ISIS immediately.⁸ Eventually Baghdadi expressed his differences with Zawahiri, explicitly revealing the rift that had evolved between ISIS and AQC:

"As for the message that was attributed to Sheikh Ayman al Zawahiri, may Allah preserve him, we have ... several shariah and method-based issues [with it], and the worshiper was given the choice between the command of His Lord and the command that opposes Allah's command,"⁹

After increasing tensions, Zawahiri formally announced the disaffiliation of al-Qaeda and ISIS on February 3rd, 2014, stating that ISIS is “not an affiliate with the al-Qaeda group and has no organizational relation with it.”¹⁰ Zawahiri declared that AQC no longer was responsible for ISIS’s actions. Four very important elements precipitated ISIS and al-Qaeda’s divide:

1. **Resource Distribution:** With the death of Bin Laden, Zawahiri no longer possessed the funding and resources that AQC once commanded. ISIS was growing more financially independent with donors from the Gulf and no longer held incentive to brook interference by Zawahiri.¹¹ This financial contention extended as far back as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s quid pro quo relationship with Bin Laden; Zarqawi took on the al-Qaeda brand in 2004 (establishing AQI) in order to acquire access to private donors, logistics, foreign fighters, and facilitation networks while Bin Laden gained an affiliate in Iraq.¹²
2. **Success:** Zawahiri is known for being very prudent and meticulous in planning operations. The fact that he was a medical doctor may betoken this.¹³ On the contrary, ISIS was a faster paced organization consumed by its local avarice in Syria and Iraq. Despite its hubris, ISIS was visibly making progress towards establishing an Islamic “Khilafa” (Caliphate). As a result, many in the jihadi world thought that AQC was losing its credibility. After all, they hadn’t carried out a major foreign attack since the 2005 London bombings and they weren’t actively establishing a caliphate.¹⁴ Not only was Baghdadi becoming financially autonomous, but his burgeoning success was contributing to ISIS’s recruitment.
3. **Relationships:** The new generation of foreign fighters we see today were probably learning how to walk while the foundations of al-Qaeda Central were being built during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It would only make sense for these fighters to follow Baghdadi — who many fought alongside with in Iraq — rather than to give allegiance to a group of jihadists they’ve never met.
4. **Methodology:** AQC was strongly opposed to Baghdadi’s indiscriminate use of violence and *takfir*, or excommunication of other Muslims.¹⁵ ISIS has been reported crucifying civilians, fighting with other jihadist groups, and executing 1700 Iraqi soldiers in Tikrit.¹⁶ AQC believed this tarnished al-Qaeda’s image and strongly advocated more narrow, strategic targeting in order to achieve objectives — explicitly rebuking Baghdadi’s methods.

There was a clear divide between Zawahiri and Baghdadi. Furthermore, Baghdadi was becoming more independent and no longer required the perks of being under the al-Qaeda brand. On June 29th, a few months following ISIS and al-Qaeda’s split, ISIS announced the establishment of the long-desired Caliphate and rebranded their group at the **Islamic State (IS)**. Accordingly to religious interpretation, it was also requested that Muslims everywhere give *bay’ah* (allegiance) to the Caliphate and its leader, Baghdadi. In other words: you aligned with al-Qaeda or the newly established Islamic State. The implications of this announcement will be discussed in detail at the conclusion of this brief.

Goals

The Islamic State wishes to restore the “Khilafa” (Caliphate), a transnational Islamic state that would prevail over the European carved borders established within the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement of World War I. The Caliphate would be governed by sharia law and ruled by a caliph; someone considered to be a successor to Muhammad’s political authority. On June 29th, 2014 the announcement restoring of the Caliphate was made. Baghdadi — who the world knows very little about — revealed his ‘real’ name and became self-proclaimed Caliph Ibrahim II, ostensibly showing his lineage to Caliph Ibrahim I who ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1640-1648.¹⁷

Within the territory that ISIS has appropriated, life is analogous to any state government. ISIS builds and maintains supermarkets, power lines, roads, religious schools, and post offices. They even have a police force and consumer protection office.¹⁸ An important component to their governance is their social services sector, where they help run bread



factories and give out fruits and vegetables to local residents.¹⁹ In the Syrian town of Raqqa, IS established a food kitchen to help the needy and an Office of Orphans to pair orphans with families.²⁰ Although this seemingly beneficent “hearts and minds” component seems adequate for life, the IS’s form of justice is comparable to Hammurabi code: thieves have their hands chopped off in public and apostates are crucified in town centers.²¹

On a more pressing narrative, the Islamic State wishes to kill Americans and Israelis. Let’s not forget that the Islamic State derived from al-Qaeda in Iraq — those of which hunted Americans during the 2003 Iraq liberation. Osama Bin Laden, the inspirational founding father of al-Qaeda, called for active opposition in his two “fatwas” in 1996 and 1998, where he expressed disgust with the American presence in Saudi Arabia and the spilling of Muslim blood in Israel and Iraq.²² Bin Laden’s second fatwa concluded with the following passage directed towards Muslims everywhere:

“The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies -- civilians and military -- is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it... [E]very Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it.”²³

Structure: The exact number of IS fighters is ambiguous; many Baathist groups, Sunni tribes, and other moderate Islamist groups have participated in the fighting against the Iraqi government alongside IS and many foreign fighters continue to join IS's ranks by crossing the Turkish border into Syria. Reports have generally ranged anywhere from 7,000 to 12,000 fighters, with a relatively equal force present in Iraq and Syria.²⁴ What is known is that IS is a centralized group with coherent top-down leadership.²⁵ In addition to issuing periodic reports to attract recruitment, IS collects statistics on their ground operations to calibrate when resources are utilized most efficiently.²⁶ One recruitment video shows an IS fighter at a checkpoint accessing a database via a computer, where the names of Iraqi government and military officials can be looked up for targeting.²⁷ This is clearly a sophisticated force — one that has made considerable progress towards establishing and governing its long desired Islamic caliphate.²⁸

Social Media Presence: IS has a robust social media campaign that acts a propaganda front for recruitment and donations. According to J.M. Berger, an analyst that studies extremism and frequently contributes to *Foreign Policy*, IS has created a Twitter app: those with the app receive tweets posted to their Twitter accounts with links, hashtags, and images.²⁹ This is evident in the inorganic, often consistent spikes of traffic following certain IS-related events. IS has also exploited the #WorldCup hashtag by posting beheadings and other images to further disseminate its propaganda. Finally, IS publicly releases periodic reports and audio messages on its progress in multiple languages, including Arabic, English, German, French and Russian.

Financial Base: IS has relied on funding from donors in countries like Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, but more recently on incoming recruits. According to the provincial governor of Nineveh, Atheel al-Nujaifi, IS had looted over \$425 million in Iraqi dinars and gold bullion from Mosul's banks — Iraq's second largest city.³⁰ This would make IS one of the richest terrorist organizations in the world, ever. Yet even before Mosul's capture, reports claimed that IS had netted \$8 million monthly through the extortion of businesses, large and small, in Mosul alone.³¹

Armaments: IS is armed with technicals, rocket propelled grenades, mortars, and small arms. However in recent operations they have acquired more advanced weaponry; primarily Iraq Security Force (ISF) Humvees, Saddam-era T-55/T-72/BMP tanks, M-113 personnel carriers, howitzer artillery cannons, and an inoperable SCUD missile that was acquired in 2013 from an Israeli airstrike on a Syrian facility.³² Jessica D. Lewis, a former U.S. Army intelligence officer and scholar at the Institute for the Study of War, suggested that IS has professionals that are capable of operating these Saddam-era weaponry, but there would be a learning curve to acquiring the necessary expertise to operate more advanced U.S. made weaponry that Iraq possesses. Reports of a Blackhawk helicopter being captured is suspect according to senior defense officials because these helicopters were never sold to Iraq.³³ Iraq's Air Force is minimal, consisting of mostly utility helicopters.

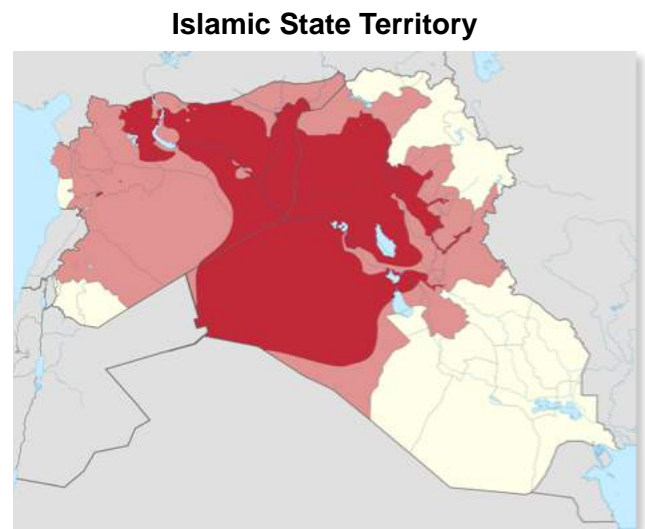
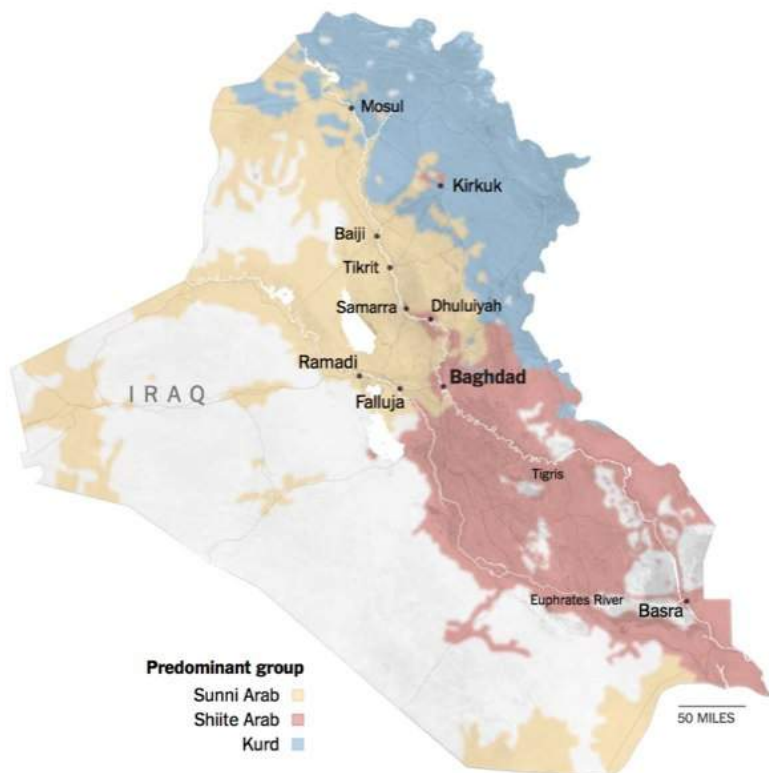


Why Are They Successful?

It was reported that 30,000 Iraqi soldiers retreated against an opposition of only 800 Islamic State fighters in the attack on Mosul — Iraq's second largest city.³⁴ Two important geopolitical factors attribute to IS's success:

Iraqi Military Incompetence: Iraq's military has continuously struggled in combat readiness and effective leadership since Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki came to power.³⁵ Corruption is widespread and a lack of morale plagues the ranks of the Iraqi Security Force.³⁶ There have been many recent cases of senior military officers abandoning their outposts unannounced and ordering their troops to follow suit after facing threats of an IS attack. Many of Maliki's former generals and commanders were replaced with loyalists to his regime — those who weren't as experienced and trusted by their soldiers.³⁷

Sunni Alienation: Prime Minister Maliki, who comes from the Iraqi Shia majority, has been criticized of alienating the Iraqi Sunni minority during his tenure. According to a December 2010 Defense Report, IS had been a "a primary instigator for ethno-sectarian violence" and would "seek to capitalize on Sunni disenfranchisement and Arab-Kurd tensions." In fact, Iraq's premier polling service and member of Gallup International, IIASS, suggests that only 10-20% of the fighting within Iraq is carried out by IS. One major Sunni Baathist group that has been reported cooperating with IS, Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al- Naqshabandi (JRTN), has conducted insurgent activities directed at discrediting the Iraqi government.³⁸ A correlation can be easily drawn between Sunni inhabited Iraqi territory and the territory that the Islamic State controls.



Least Likely Scenario: The United States does nothing. Some fear that this could open a vacuum to Iranian influence. Many agree this would leave the Iraq region in chaos. On the contrary, some counterterrorism experts claim that the Levant region is currently a “meat-grinder” for groups like al-Nusra, IS, Hezbollah, etc. All of these groups are fighting for territory, expending resources on each other, and making it less attractive for international donors and prospective jihadi fighters to contribute. In other words, they are self-depreciating.

Most Dangerous Scenario: U.S. Military intervention. To get involved would give more meaning to IS’s efforts and reinforce their jihadi ideology; “we built the Caliphate and the Americans destroyed it”. Dr. Michael Connell, a senior research scientist at the Center for Naval Analysis, suggested the deployment of a U.S. Marine Corps battalion if there were to be an intervention. Although this is not desirable, he mentioned that it was an option on the table.³⁹ Retired General Jack Keane, an architect of the successful Iraqi “surge” strategy in the Iraq War, is a huge proponent of special forces operations and air power — notably laser guided bombs because of their high rate of precision.⁴⁰ To further justify this course of action he noted that IS is acting more like a military rather than smaller cells of a terrorist organization; there is more transparency in fixed military sites and more consistency in military movements. This makes targeting inherently less challenging. Conversely General Petraeus, former CIA Director and also architect of the Iraq “surge” strategy, strongly dismisses the use of air strikes.⁴¹ However, he would “support actions to target high value ISIS [IS] elements” if President Obama and other leaders conclude that IS poses a significant threat.⁴² It still remains unclear what means of military action he would prescribe. We do know that any military action would be strongly condemned by the Saudi Arabian government, a key ally of the U.S. government within the region.

Most Likely Scenario: The use of ‘soft-power’, as Dr. Connell suggests. This is precisely what we’re doing now: deploying special forces military advisors, launching unmanned aircraft surveillance missions in IS territory, and developing intelligence capabilities with the Iraqi government.⁴³ The escalation of this current strategy to military intervention is uncertain, although President Obama is prepared to launch military strikes if intelligence suggested such a course of action.⁴⁴ It is almost unanimous among senior defense officials and scholars that our intelligence capabilities within the region must be rebuilt. Following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, our intelligence capabilities went with it. The U.S. currently relies on satellite imagery and signals intelligence and lacks human assets on the ground. With the recent Edward Snowden leaks, intelligence collection in these environments have only become more challenging.

As earlier discussed, a divide between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State had fully blossomed earlier this year, entering the world into a new era of international jihad.

With the announcement of the Caliphate, it is religiously compulsory of all Muslims to give *bay'ah* (allegiance) to Caliph Ibrahim II and the Caliphate. Dissenters will be labeled as apostates or sinners; you are with IS or against it. This is an audacious strategy and is will likely cause great contention among the Muslim community. As extremism analyst J.M. Berger sees it, it is a "high-risk, high-reward" scenario. Though it further polarizes AQ and IS, it opens the opportunity for high-level defections, particularly from al-Qaeda segments in Northern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, as well as new enthusiastic sources of recruitment and funding. However if IS is pushed out of Iraq by force, it will corroborate Zawahiri's disposition that IS is overconfident, ill-advised, and full of arrogance — ultimately having a profoundly negative impact on IS's appeal.

More importantly, this creates a serious issue for the United States, Western Europe, and Israel: competition among IS and AQ. While IS may be consumed with state building, al-Qaeda should only be more motivated to launch a foreign attack to reassert influence within the jihadi world to make it known that it is still a player. Likewise if IS is pushed out of Iraq and AQ reclaims its glory, it will further motivate IS to regain its lost notoriety.

As we look to the future, we must scrutinize the potential defections from al-Qaeda elements to the Islamic State as well as the consolidation of the Islamic State's gains within Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State could fall just as quickly as it ascended, but it very well could maintain its powerful influence in the jihadi world.

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