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THE ISLAMIC STATE

BY: **RICHARD BARRETT**
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BY:
RICHARD BARRETT
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT
THE SOUFAN GROUP

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INTRODUCTION

The self-styled Islamic State is an accident of history, emerging from multiple social, political and economic tensions in the Middle East and beyond. It has challenged the territorial divisions imposed on the region following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire by carving out for itself a large area of territory. But ultimately, its impact will flow as much from its challenge to established concepts of government, national sovereignty, and national identity. The Islamic State is most notable for the violence with which it asserts control, but its ruthless tactics will likely prevent the group from ruling effectively and building broader support beyond the front line fighters who protect its security and the authoritarian killers who patrol its streets.

The Islamic State is a highly visible but clandestine organization. Despite the vast amount of publicity and analysis it has generated since 2011, verifiable facts concerning its leadership and structure remain few and far between. The picture is obscured by the misleading propaganda of the State itself and by the questionable accounts of people who claim to be familiar with it. It is a movement that has accelerated fast along the path from terrorism through insurgency towards proto-statehood, but it is also one that for all its bravado seems fearful that it could just as quickly be forced back underground. As a result, this paper relies on the group's own publications, the observations of defectors, and analysis by others who take an interest in its progress, despite the paucity of information. Nonetheless, *The Soufan Group* believes that enough is available to draw a useful picture of the evolution of the State, its structure and its operations, even though it may lack clarity and detail.

The paper refers throughout to the organization as The Islamic State, being the name it uses to describe itself. The only alternative would be to call it by its Arabic acronym, commonly transliterated as Da'ish or Daesh (*al Dawla al Islamiya fi al Iraq wa al Sham*). Clearly, the use of its full name does not imply any endorsement or recognition of its self-description.

OBSERVATIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

From late 2011 The Islamic State has shown itself both tactically and strategically adept. After years of surviving as a persistently violent criminal/terrorist gang able to mount multiple synchronized attacks in built up areas in Iraq but little more, it managed to break into the big time when the collapse of government in northern and eastern Syria allowed it to expand across the border. At the same time, the sectarian approach of the then Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki had made the Sunni minority in Iraq ready to support any group that appeared to have the potential to reverse its increasing marginalization. Sunni tribal support continues to be essential to the viability of The Islamic State.

The rapid expansion of The Islamic State on both sides of the Iraq/Syria border after 2011 pushed it along the continuum from terrorism to insurgency. Its underground cells became military divisions and its hit-and-run tactics became campaigns to conquer and hold territory. These changes required leaders with different skills, and it was fortunate for The Islamic State that many in its top echelons were ex-Ba'athists who had held senior positions under Saddam Hussein. Nonetheless, military leaders do not necessarily make good civilian administrators, and the challenge of governing territory is likely to prove the State's undoing, unless it can temper the ruthless totalitarianism that appears to motivate its core fighters with a degree of tolerance and pragmatism that might reassure its unwilling subjects.

Despite the original secularism of its Ba'athist leaders, The Islamic State claims religious legitimacy for its actions. This is based on an extreme salafist/takfiri interpretation of Islam that essentially means that anyone who opposes its rule is by definition either an apostate (*murtad*) or an infidel (*kafir*). Although much of the Muslim Middle East is salafist, takfirism is widely considered a step too far, and the absolutism of The Islamic State has already attracted criticism, even from ideologues who support al Qaeda. Nonetheless, although The Islamic State is not exactly winning friends, various factors help it to survive, and will continue to do so for so long as they exist.

The first is the deep sectarian fault line that has been a major determinant of Middle East politics since the Iranian revolution of 1979, but of particular importance since the growth of Iranian regional influence following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Despite the menace of The Islamic State to the stability of the whole region, states on either side of the sectarian divide continue to see it as a lesser danger than the regional dominance of their rivals. Until this calculation changes, The Islamic State will not face major regional opposition.

The second is the complete lack of confidence in the Arab world of the ruled in the capacity of their rulers to treat them fairly. This extends beyond Iraq and Syria to the many countries of the Middle East and North Africa where the idea of government according to the teachings of the Quran is hugely appealing - at least until it comes up against the reality of The Islamic State. For so long as governance in so many countries fails to meet the expectations of the people, there will be a steady flow of hopeful recruits to the ranks of The Islamic State; and many others who lack the means or opportunity to travel may be tempted to follow its directives within their own countries. The consequent fear of terrorism, whether domestic or imported, is likely to lead to further repression and other deficiencies in governance in all but the most confident and forward looking states.

The third is that the international coalition led by the United States of over 60 partners and nations who oppose the practices and objectives of The Islamic State,¹ provides further evidence for many Muslims around the world that there is a Western-led onslaught on their religion and independence. The Islamic State itself is incandescent with rage that the West will not just leave it alone to establish the Utopia that it believes within its reach. It is hard at work persuading potential supporters that the non-Muslim world will do whatever it can to protect local rulers and so ensure that their discriminatory and irreligious policies remain in force. Not enough is being done on the ground to counter this narrative.

¹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/10/14/president-obama-joins-international-military-leaders-discuss-coalition-efforts-again>.

The fourth is that the little being done to counter the narrative of The Islamic State does not penetrate the information bubble created by its actual or potential supporters. The State devotes a great deal of time and effort to propagating a positive image of itself, reinforced by a strong ideology. Despite the many weaknesses of the literal approach to religious texts adopted by The Islamic State, including its apocalyptic vision of the imminent end of times, its message is stronger, clearer and more consistent than that of its opponents. It offers a complete break with what has gone before as opposed to its enemies who just offer more of the same. For all its violence, The Islamic State promises its recruits adventure and intense engagement with an exciting new venture. There are no competing voices offering anything comparable.

The fifth, also connected with the narrative promoted by The Islamic State, is the lack of attractive alternatives for local and foreign fighters who decide to join The Islamic State as a way to find identity, purpose, belonging or spiritual fulfillment. Thus both the pull and push factors that motivate foreign fighters remain unaddressed. Furthermore, the lack of a positive counter narrative that also exploits the negative aspects of the propaganda of The Islamic State, leaves those who are attracted by its message - but concerned about its activities - without a clear understanding that it is just not possible to engage with the State without also signing up to its worst aspects.

The sixth is that despite the international opposition to the discriminatory and repressive practices of the Syrian and, to a lesser extent, the Iraqi Governments, nothing convincing is being done to force a change. In this respect, The Islamic State appears more effective and better motivated than any actor on the other side. Unless political reform is able to draw away this soft support, The Islamic State will over time bring it closer by entwining the fortunes of the local population and tribal leaders with its own.

Finally, the cultural, educational and religious stagnation evident in so much of the Middle East and North Africa does not encourage any new way of thinking about the future beyond a desire to return to the past and start again.

THE ISLAMIC STATE: SUMMARY

By October 2014, the self-declared ‘Caliphate’ of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, also known as The Islamic State, was in control of territory stretching from North of Aleppo to South of Baghdad and including the cities of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. About six million people on either side of the Syria Iraq border were living under its rule.²

The Islamic State’s control of territory depends on alliances with various local actors, primarily Sunni tribal groups, members of Saddam Hussein’s army and intelligence services, and other casualties of the Shia-dominated governments of Bashar al Assad and Nouri al Maliki. Nonetheless, The Islamic State has demonstrated a comprehensive approach to its accretion of land, taking over areas held by weaker adversaries, regardless of their political stance or sectarian belief, as well as areas that provide resources, such as oil, water, and wheat. The longer-term strength of The Islamic State relies on it maintaining its alliances while it deepens its own independent levers of power. It has to strike a balance between governing by fear and governing by consent in order to achieve sustainability, especially as international action against it becomes more determined.



Source: The New York Times from Caerus Associates, Long War Journal, Institute for the Study of War, October 2014

² Estimates vary between 6 and 8 million but the true figure is unknown, especially as many inhabitants of the area have fled. See for example, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n16/patrick-cockburn/isis-consolidates>, and <http://online.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-fills-coffers-from-illicit-economy-in-syria-iraq-1409175458>.

The Islamic State attempts to draw its legitimacy from religion. Even a self-declared Caliphate must project a strong ideological-religious appeal, and The Islamic State taps into the widespread belief of Salafists that the Muslim world can and should return to the simplicity and unity that they imagine existed in the earliest days of Islam. While the ideological appeal of The Islamic State, both inside and outside Iraq, draws on a narrative common to global terrorism - that the governments in the Muslim countries of the Middle East are corrupt, irreligious, and heavily influenced by the United States and other Western powers - unlike al Qaeda, it is more immediately focused on violent revolution in Muslim majority countries than on attacking their Western sponsors. In order to achieve both the revolution within the Islamic world and the purist government that The Islamic State advocates, it exacerbates the political fault line within Islam between Shia and Sunni traditions of belief.

Its most active supporters are generally insufficiently knowledgeable about their religion to challenge the distortions of Islam preached by the ideologues of The Islamic State. They accept at face value the justifications provided for the widespread murder and absolutist style of government that are its hallmarks. Their individual motivation for joining has more to do with the dynamics of a social network that provides direction, identity, purpose, belonging, empowerment and excitement, than it does with religious understanding. The Islamic State also offers an opportunity for potential recruits all over the world to join something new, and to leave behind unwelcome baggage from the past.

The tactics employed by The Islamic State are the tactics of insurgency, terrorism, and guerrilla warfare. Most of its core leadership, many of whom are ex Ba'athists, have been involved in clandestine and violent opposition to the Iraqi state since 2003. Several were held at various times in US-run detention camps, and some escaped from Iraqi prisons during the 'Breaking the Walls' campaign of the predecessor group, The Islamic State of Iraq, from July 2012 to July 2013.³ Their combined knowledge and experience have made The Islamic State first and foremost a fighting force, but, at least in its main urban centers, the State has also attempted to consolidate its territorial gains by developing an administrative capacity. This has meant that as well as attracting fighters to its ranks, it has also set out to build a cadre of civilian technocrats. It is in this area that the long-term weaknesses of the State are most evident. Unless it can maintain existing public infrastructure and meet demands for food, water, health care, sanitation and energy, and build and sustain a functioning economy, it will not survive.

³ <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/al-qaeda-iraq-resurgent-part-ii>.

Economically, The Islamic State has revenue from oil sales, taxes on businesses and individuals, tolls on commercial road traffic, the sale of captured equipment, the operation of stolen factories, and a variety of more traditional criminal activity such as kidnap for ransom, looting, extortion and protection money. In its earlier days, individual donations from local and external supporters provided an important revenue stream, though by mid-2014 this was no longer so significant in percentage terms. The capture of large amounts of military equipment, vehicles, and fuel depots, as well as the appropriation of property abandoned by those fleeing its advance or belonging to people it kills, also provide resources that help it to continue its campaign and reward its followers.

The Islamic State employs several thousand people, somewhere between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, according to US intelligence estimates,⁴ and another army of administrators to keep the State functioning. Its fighters are both volunteers, many from abroad,⁵ and conscripts, forced into service by local commanders either from individual families or from tribes in conquered areas. Similarly, administrative staff are a mix of volunteers and the coerced, with the latter category comprising the majority as The Islamic State has persuaded workers to stay in their jobs and has continued to pay them a salary. An Islamic State supervisor may be appointed to oversee operations in key facilities such as bakeries or municipal services, but the essential staff are local people who, for one reason or another, have remained in place. Their loyalty therefore cannot be guaranteed.

The Islamic State also tries to win support through its outreach via electronic media. It pays considerable attention to its image and tries to balance pictures of horror - intended to demoralize its enemies - with a softer image to encourage its friends. In the short-term this has been successful, but as with its military and administrative victories, much of its success is a reflection of the weakness of the opposition rather than of its own inherent strength. The future of the State depends, therefore, on whether alternative centers of power in both Iraq and Syria are able to offer sufficiently credible assurances of a better life to persuade the uncommitted majority of people who live under Islamic State tutelage to risk their lives in opposing it.

⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/index.html>.

⁵ In June 2014, The Soufan Group estimated that about 12,000 foreign fighters had joined rebel groups in Syria, including The Islamic State, since 2011, see: <http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>. Anecdotal evidence subsequently suggests that over half those remaining had joined The Islamic State by August 2014.

January
2004

May 2003
Zarqawi-led group begins operations in Iraq



August 2003
Zarqawi's group explodes UN
Headquarters in Baghdad



January
2005

May 2004
Zarqawi begins videotaped
beheadings in Baghdad



October 2004
Foundation of
al Qaeda in Iraq

لا إله إلا الله
مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ
قَاعِدَةُ
الْجِهَادِ
فِي بِلَادِ الرَّاغِبِينَ

January
2006

April 2005
AQI becomes a foreign fighter magnet and targets Shi'a, much to
the concern of AQ Central

June 2006
Zarqawi killed in US
military air strike



February 2006
Bombing of the Shi'a
al Askari Mosque in
Samarra; full
sectarian conflict
ensues

October 2006
Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) is
formed; Abu Omar Baghdad
named new leader



January
2007

January 2007
US military surge and Sunni Awakening begin to greatly diminish ISI



January
2008

May 2008

Relentless pressure on ISI and other groups by USMIL and GOI results in lowest levels of violence since 2005



January 2009

Prime Minister Maliki targets Sunni leaders and Awakening groups, increasing sectarian tensions and latent support for ISI in Sunni tribal areas. This lessens the pressure on ISIS, allowing it to stave off disaster.

January
2009



August 2009

ISI bombs Iraqi Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Finance, killing hundreds

January
2010



April 2010

ISI leaders Abu Omar al Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al Masri are killed in US-led air strike



May 2010

Abu Bakr al Baghdadi is announced as the new leader for a greatly diminished ISI

January
2012

July 2012

ISI announces the initiation of “Breaking Down the Walls” campaign, to “refuel” the group by freeing members from Iraqi prisons and by regaining lost ground



January
2013

April 2013

The group announces that Jabhat al Nusra is its official Syrian offshoot and therefore the group shall be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Sham (ISIS). Al Nusra immediately rejects the statement and appeals to al Qaeda Central for judgment.



July 2013

ISIS announces the initiation of “A Soldier’s Harvest” campaign designed to intimidate/liquidate/assassinate Iraqi security forces, and to establish control over territory

August 2013

ISIS begins sustained attacks on Syrian rebel groups such as Liwa al Tawhid and Ahrar al Sham, and then al Nusra in Raqqa and Aleppo. This completely changes the nature of the rebellion in Syria.



January
2014

January 2014

After serious fighting, ISIS claims control over Raqqa, and names it the capital of the ISIS emirate, a highly significant and symbolic move



February 2014

Al Qaeda Central, led by Ayman al Zawahiri, publicly severs ties with ISIS; ISIS responds by saying they represent AQ-bin Laden and not AQ-Zawahiri



Summer 2014



June 2014

ISIS takes control over Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and border areas between Iraq and Syria, claims the borders of Sykes-Picot are void



June 30, 2014

ISIS announced the re-establishment of the Caliphate, and renames itself "the Islamic State" (IS)



July 2014

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi leads prayer at a mosque in Mosul, his first public appearance. He emphasizes the existence of the Caliphate and renames himself Caliph Ibrahim

August 2014

Despite US airstrikes and Iraqi, Kurdish, and Iranian forces, The Islamic State maintains control over large areas of Iraq, and solidifies its positions in Syria



August 2014

The Islamic State releases a video showing the beheading of American journalist James Foley, who had been kidnapped by extremists in Syria in 2012

Autumn 2014



September 2014

The United States forms a coalition against The Islamic State, and begins airstrikes in Iraq and later Syria



October 2014

The Islamic State has solidified its hold in Mosul and in areas of Syria, and advances on the vital wheat-fields of Kobani, Syria, near the Turkish border

EVOLUTION

The Islamic State takes pride in claiming the Jordanian terrorist, Abu Musab al Zarqawi (Ahmad Fadeel al Nazal al Khalayleh) as its founder and inspiration, and it has been assiduously polishing his reputation through its online propaganda.⁶ In truth, Zarqawi was a local Jordanian hoodlum who discovered that he had an ability to inspire a following through the violent pursuit of an anti-State and anti-Shia agenda based loosely on the teachings of a fellow Jordanian, Abu Mohammed al Maqdisi (Isam Mohammad Tahir al Barqawi), one of the most famous contemporary salafist/takfiri preachers,⁷ whom he had first met in Afghanistan in the 1990s.⁸

Although in contact with al Qaeda at this time, Zarqawi regarded the Levant as a more important battleground than the West and generally kept his distance from Usama bin Laden and Aiman al Zawahiri. He set up a training camp in Western Afghanistan and established *Jund al Sham* (the Army of the Levant).⁹ The US invasion of Iraq provided Zarqawi an opportunity to build his organization, which he renamed *al Tawhid wa al Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad), and by August 2003 he was well enough established to launch three major attacks: against the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad, the United Nations headquarters there, and the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, an important Shia shrine.

In 2004, after much discussion, Zarqawi joined al Qaeda and changed the name of his group to Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).¹⁰ Zarqawi believed an association with al Qaeda would attract recruits and funds, while bin Laden needed a presence in Iraq as the most active front for 'jihad' at that time. Bin Laden may also have hoped to limit Zarqawi's ability to challenge al Qaeda's leading role by accepting him as a subordinate. Zarqawi then brought together several other groups to form the Mujahedeen Shura Council in early 2005. Zarqawi died in an American airstrike in mid-2006 and soon afterwards, under its new leader, Abu Hamza al Muhajir, an Egyptian close to Zawahiri, the group again joined with others to become The

⁶ See, for example, the July 2014 issue of *Dabiq*, The Islamic State's on-line English language magazine.

⁷ Maqdisi's theories draw from the 14th Century scholar Ibn Taymiyya (1263- 1328), who argued *inter alia* that Muslim rulers were not necessarily true Muslims and so could be overthrown, as well as from the ultra-conservative 18th Century Saudi scholar, Mohammed Ibn 'Abd al Wahhab. While a strong supporter of Al Qaeda, Maqdisi has condemned the actions of The Islamic State.

⁸ The two also spent time together in prison in Jordan in the 1990s.

⁹ Many of the Afghan characteristics of The Islamic State in organisation and appearance may originate from Zarqawi's time in the country.

¹⁰ Also known as 'Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers' and 'Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia'.

Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), headed by Abu Omar al Baghdadi. ISI was thus the local al Qaeda affiliate.

Abu Hamza and Abu Omar were killed together in 2010, by which time the movement had been severely degraded even though it had allied with many secularist opponents of the Iraqi regime who found themselves excluded from power as ex Ba'athists. It was at this point that Abu Bakr al Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al Badri al Samarrai)¹¹ became leader of the movement and set about rebuilding it, largely through a relentless campaign of car bombs and suicide bombing attacks, but subsequently much helped by the Syrian civil war, which began in earnest around May 2011.

The Syrian Civil War and the split with al Qaeda

Initially, Abu Bakr and his senior lieutenants regarded the Syrian uprising as a distraction from its Iraq-centric campaign and they forbade even their Syrian followers from joining the rebellion. However, as the uprising spread and became more violent, they allowed nine Syrian members of the group, headed by Abu Mohammed al Golani, to set up in Northern Syria in mid-2011.¹²

Golani also had the support of Zawahiri, who sent al Qaeda operatives from Pakistan and elsewhere to work with him,¹³ and he soon built up an effective fighting force, attracting recruits from both inside and outside the country. The Syrian war went viral, attracting thousands of fighters from around the globe and completely eclipsing the insurgency in Iraq. Abu Bakr therefore tried to reassert his leadership on both sides of the border and declared that Golani was his subordinate in April 2013.¹⁴ Golani refused to acknowledge that his group *Jabhat al Nusra li Ahl al Sham* (the Support Front for the People of the Levant) was a branch of The Islamic State of Iraq, and appealed to Zawahiri to rule on the matter, so making public his own association with al Qaeda.

Despite his best efforts over several months, Zawahiri was unable to reconcile the two groups or bring them to arbitration and eventually ordered Abu Bakr to limit his operations to Iraq while appointing Golani al Qaeda's man in Syria. Abu Bakr refused to accept this arrangement and so forced Zawahiri in February 2014 to disavow any al Qaeda connection

¹¹ For biographical detail see below.

¹² <http://english.al-akhbar.com/print/20017>.

¹³ Support from Zawahiri, particularly in the form of senior advisors, gave rise to the concept of the Khorasan Group.

¹⁴ <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQI29911E.shtml>.

with The Islamic State of Iraq, which Abu Bakr had already renamed The Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (the Levant) (ISIS).¹⁵ With help in particular from Amr al Absi (Abu al Athir al Shami), a Syrian born in Saudi Arabia whose brother had been killed by other rebels while leading a pro-ISIS group in the North of the country, Abu Bakr then set about establishing himself in Syria, drawing away a great many of al Nusra's foreign members.¹⁶ ISIS quickly became a dominant force in Syria and as well as attracting recruits from al Nusra and other rebel groups, it also received donations and support from outside the area, both as a successful salafist/takfiri group, and as an opponent to the regime of Bashar al Assad.

The advent of The Islamic State

On 29 June 2014,¹⁷ following rapid territorial gains, which included the capture of Mosul on 10 June, ISIS declared the revival of the Caliphate,¹⁸ naming it The Islamic State and Abu Bakr as Caliph Ibrahim.¹⁹ The declaration was intended as a rallying call to all observant Muslims, but in particular those who shared the salafist/takfiri views expressed by The Islamic State, and so draw away support from like-minded groups in Syria, including al Nusra, that might compete for recruits and resources. The declaration was also a direct challenge to the authority of Zawahiri and the role of Mullah Omar, who until then had been the undisputed *Amir al Mu'minin* (Leader of the Faithful).²⁰ At Friday prayers at the Grand Mosque of al Nuri in Mosul on 4 July, in his first address as Caliph, Abu Bakr claimed that he had reluctantly accepted the title at the behest of the community of Islamic scholars, albeit that they remained unidentified and silent. The rapid conquest of Mosul and the declaration of the Caliphate caused a brief surge in new recruits,²¹ but did not achieve the impact that supporters of The Islamic State had expected or hoped for.²² Indeed there is evidence to suggest that the reaction among extremists to the declaration of the Caliphate

¹⁵ Qaeda chief annuls Syrian-Iraqi jihad merger <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/2013699425657882.html>

¹⁶ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/print/20133>.

¹⁷ Sunni rebels declare new 'Islamic caliphate' <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/isil-declares-new-islamic-caliphate-201462917326669749.html>

¹⁸ The last Caliphate, run by the Ottoman Turks, was dissolved by the Turkish Government in 1924.

¹⁹ In his first address as Caliph on 4 July, Abu Bakr argued that as soon as Muslims controlled territory that was administered according to Islamic law (sharia), they had an obligation to declare a Caliphate.

²⁰ A title adopted by Caliphs since the 7th Century, but less presumptuous than the title itself.

²¹ 6,300 in July alone according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/19/us-syria-crisis-islamicstate-idUSKBN0GJ0W420140819>

²² <http://news.intelwire.com/2014/07/the-caliphate-so-far-flatlining.html>, and http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/09/02/islamic_state_vs_al_qaeda_next_jihadi_super_power.

overall was initially negative,²³ though following the start of coalition airstrikes in August 2014, support picked up.

Before declaring the Caliphate, ISIS had conducted some market research through social media to judge the likely reaction. It had also approached several other 'jihadist' groups; for example, Abu Bakr is said to have approached Nasser al Wuhaiishi, the military commander of al Qaeda and the head of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP),²⁴ who - unsurprisingly - rebuffed him.²⁵ He met a similar response from other leaders though he did receive some support from within Libya, Tunisia, and the Sinai.²⁶

Although the consensus opinion was that the declaration of a Caliphate would be premature because the group's control of territory was not yet firm enough, Abu Bakr decided that he had more to gain than to lose, and may also have been deceived by his own appreciation of his historic role. Jabhat al Nusra has since shown that it faces similar disagreements over raising its status, in this case to become an Islamic Emirate or State.²⁷ A supposedly leaked tape of Golani announcing an Islamic State in four areas of Syria under al Nusra control on 12 July 2014 was followed by a partial retraction and some confusion.²⁸

Although Abu Bakr has failed to achieve a significant number of pledges of allegiance to the Caliphate, even from salafist/takfiri groups,²⁹ that does not mean that they all oppose him. Even AQAP has said that it respects the achievements of The Islamic State, even though it does not endorse its claim to leadership. At first the lack of endorsement may have made Abu Bakr appear something of a clown elsewhere in the Muslim world, but his dramatic appearance in Mosul on 4 July, heavy with symbolism that will have impressed some Muslims who watched his performance, and the sheer determination of his fighters in the field, despite the growing alliance against them, have at the very least attracted worldwide interest and admiration among extremists.

²³ <http://news.intelwire.com/2014/07/is-backlash-spills-over-on-jabhat-al.html>.

²⁴ However, AQAP, like other AQ affiliates, supports the objectives of The Islamic State even though it does not support the declaration of the Caliphate.

²⁵ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18219> which reports the Twitter leaks of @wikibaghady, a former member of The Islamic State who defected to Jabhat al Nusra.

²⁶ From Ansar al-Sharia branches and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. See JM Berger for an overall analysis at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/09/02/islamic_state_vs_al_qaeda_next_jihadi_super_power.

²⁷ <http://eaworldview.com/2014/07/syria-daily-jabhat-al-nusra-denies-declared-islamic-emirate/>.

²⁸ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Jul-14/263738-nusra-plans-own-islamic-emirate-in-syria.ashx#axzz3A79FiwDS>.

²⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10943404/Most-Muslims-dont-care-about-the-Isis-Caliphate.html>.

For example, in July 2014, Abu Bakar Bashir, the leader of salafist/takfiris in Indonesia, announced his support for The Islamic State and was reported by security officials to have been urging his followers to help the movement.³⁰ Similarly, there has been growing support for The Islamic State in Pakistan and India,³¹ where flags and pamphlets with The Islamic State logo are circulating, and even groups closely aligned with al Qaeda acknowledge and praise the objectives and achievements of the self-declared Caliphate.³² As Indonesia, Pakistan and India are home to the three largest Muslim communities in the world, it is unsurprising that there are militants among them who are attracted to The Islamic State, but its appeal also reaches into areas where Muslims are an insignificant minority of the population. The mixture of apparent religious legitimacy and military success has proved an inspiration that has drawn recruits and funds from at least 81 countries.³³

A possible reunification

There are many other salafist/takfiris who sympathize with The Islamic State but are reluctant to break their ties with whatever al Qaeda affiliated organization they have signed up with. They do not welcome the fighting between the two groups, nor the ‘with us or against us’ attitude of The Islamic State. As a result, the al Qaeda leadership and many of the senior ideologues that support the salafist/takfiri approach still hope that some reconciliation between the two groups is possible. The coalition airstrikes against The Islamic State, which have also targeted Jabhat al Nusra in Syria and senior al Qaeda members who are there to promote the al Qaeda agenda both in and beyond Syria, has revived attempts to bring the groups together in the face of a common enemy.³⁴

These appeals are unlikely to succeed in the short term unless Abu Bakr is recognized as holding some superior position to the leader of any other group, including Zawahiri. But nonetheless, circumstances may yet force the groups to cooperate more closely on the ground. A key factor will be whether The Islamic State is able to maintain the momentum of its recruitment in the face of military reverses and more determined international efforts to

³⁰ <http://www.straitstimes.com/news/asia/south-east-asia/story/jailed-indonesian-terrorist-abu-bakar-bashir-has-been-funding-isis-a>.

³¹ Several prominent members of the Pakistan Taliban pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr in October 2014.

³² <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/09/07/kashmir-maharashtra-kolkata-pakistan-isl-idINKBN0H203K20140907>.

³³ See <http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>.

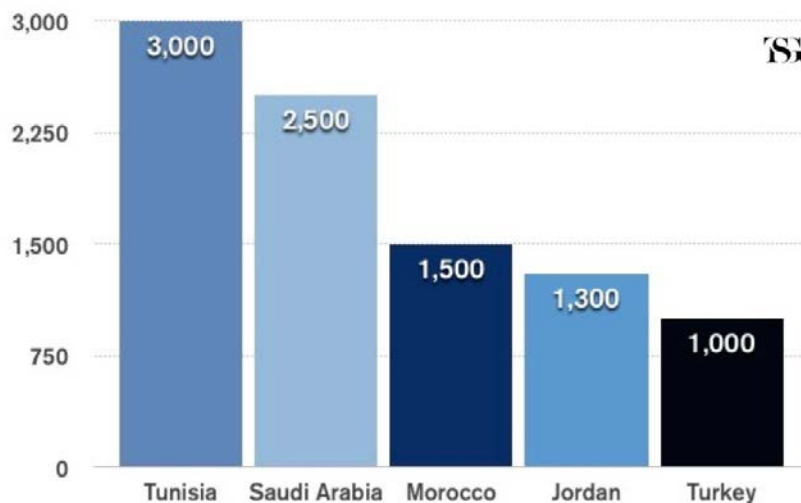
³⁴ See for example, ‘An Initiative and Call for a Ceasefire Between Factions in Syria,’ issued on 30 September. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/10/leading_pro-al_qaeda.php.

restrict its income, impede its movements and prevent its fighters traveling from outside Syria and Iraq.

On the al Qaeda side, while the calls for unity certainly reflect the widespread attitude of its members, they are self-serving in that they remind the audience of the core al Qaeda narrative: that the United States is leading a war against Islam, rather than just against The Islamic State. If, in response to the coalition airstrikes, The Islamic State attempts to launch a major terrorist attack outside Syria and Iraq, it will be seen to have acknowledged the validity of the al Qaeda argument.³⁵

Ultimately, the struggle for supremacy between al Qaeda and The Islamic State will turn on two things: the ability of the State to consolidate its territorial gains and hold them over time, and the attitude of the several thousand foreign fighters who make up over half its core membership. About 15,000 foreigners have joined the Islamic State since 2011, with over half coming from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, and Turkey. If these fighters desert it, The Islamic State will probably be unable to maintain momentum and so be a far easier target for its enemies. If these fighters join al Qaeda groups, The Islamic State will have to abandon its hopes of dominating the salafist/takfiri environment. But on the other hand, if these fighters stay loyal to The Islamic State but leave Iraq and Syria, The Islamic State will certainly be the dominant force in 'global jihad' for some years to come.

More than half of the estimated 15,000 foreign fighters in The Islamic State come from just five countries:



³⁵ The Islamic State may already have directed members who have been caught planning attacks in other countries.

However, its dependence on foreign fighters has shown that The Islamic State has not evolved into a truly indigenous movement, and the very presence of so many foreigners in its ranks may have put local fighters off joining. Certainly they are generally extremely radical and a significant number have become suicide bombers, with The Islamic State reporting suicide attacks in 2014 alone by Afghans, Danes, Egyptians, French, Iranians, Jordanians, Libyans, Moroccans, Pakistanis, Russians (Chechens), Saudi Arabians, Syrians, Tajiks, Tunisians, Turks, and Uzbeks.³⁶ The great majority of these attacks are carried out by Saudis.³⁷

³⁶ http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2014/10/german_saudi_and_turkish_islam.php.

³⁷ <http://alhayat.com/Articles/5095504>.

OBJECTIVES AND IDEOLOGY: POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS

The ideology of The Islamic State

Aside from a lust for power, the driving ideological force behind The Islamic State comes from two very different directions, though both have a common theme. The first and now dominant strand is the fundamentalist canon of Islamic opinion that stretches from the 14th Century scholar Ibn Taymiyya through Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab, who died in 1792, to modern day salafist ideologues. Essentially their interpretation of Islam demands the harsh and absolute rejection of any innovation since the times of the Prophet. They argue that any diversion from puritanical precepts that they draw from a literal reading of the Quran and the Hadith is blasphemy, and must be eradicated. It follows therefore that Shi’ism, Sufism or essentially anything - and anyone - that does not conform to their interpretation of Islam, should be destroyed. This is the essence of takfirism.³⁸ The Islamic State therefore claims legitimacy for its violence by arguing that all its actions are in the interest of reviving Islam, returning it to its pure form, uniting the Muslim world under truly Islamic rule, and so restoring the dignity and greatness of its people while fulfilling the orders of God.

The influence of ex-Ba’athists

The other strand of The Islamic State, most evident in its organization and political objectives, is Ba’athism, or rather the network of ex-Ba’athists who joined forces with The Islamic State between 2008 and 2010. Ba’athism in its original form sought the revival of the Arab race by rescuing it from the corruption of its values and the legacy of colonialism. It sought a pan-Arab state under a single leadership with the Ba’ath party leading the way. Although Ba’athism was a secularist movement and argued for the separation of government from religion, and although Iraq and Syria remained secular states under Ba’athist government, the development of Islam was seen by Ba’athist theoreticians as evidence of the greatness of Arab culture and of the intellectual vitality of its people. Perhaps inevitably, when professed Ba’athists managed to take control in Iraq and Syria, they fell into the same trap that had claimed so many other reformers before them. Elements of

³⁸ Alastair Crooke has written interestingly on this strand of the ideology of IS: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html, and http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-aim-saudi-arabia_b_5748744.html.







elitism, fascism, and racism emerged and Ba'athism became a cult of the leadership rather than a vanguard movement working in the interests of the people.

Both the salafist/takfiri approach and the theory of Ba'athism share a vision of a new beginning through a return to the past. Although salafist/takfirism is theoretically more inclusive than Ba'athism, in that it embraces non-Arabs who sign up and obey the rules, the idea of a state run by a small group of the enlightened is similar to both. Furthermore, even though the great majority of Ba'athists who opposed the new government in Iraq were secular, and had joined the Ba'ath party only as a way to progress up the hierarchy, they recognized that salafist/takfirism resonated far more strongly and proved a much better motivator among the masses than Ba'athism ever could. Every political movement needs ideological glue to succeed and the Ba'athists seem to have decided that so long as they could run the campaign to regain power, they did not much mind what their salafist/takfiri allies thought might happen next.

The alliance between members of AQI and ex-Ba'athist was also strengthened by many of them finding themselves thrown together in United States detention centers in Iraq such as Camp Bucca. It seems likely, for example, that Abu Bakr overlapped there with some of the ex-members of the Ba'ath party who subsequently became senior leaders in The Islamic State.

In the early days of the alliance, the Ba'athists may have had the upper hand as they brought military and organizational skills and a network of experienced bureaucrats that AQI and then ISI lacked. The rumored influence - and success - that Hajji Bakr, a senior Ba'athist ex-army officer who had risen to a senior position in ISI, had in getting Abu Bakr appointed to head the organization on the death of Abu Omar al Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al Muhajir (al Masri) in 2010, suggests that the Ba'athists were still ascendant at that time. But since the exponential growth of the movement from late 2011 as a result of the Syrian civil war, culminating in the declaration of the Caliphate on 29 June 2014, it seems that the salafist/takfiris have taken over. This also reflects the hardening of sectarianism as an issue of belief rather than one of group identity, which has resulted in a wider range of Sunnis outside Iraq joining or supporting The Islamic State. The Shia reaction has been to see The Islamic State as part of an unholy alliance against them of Sunni and Ba'athist groups such as Jaysh Rijal al Tariqa al Naqshbandiya (JRTN), so compounding the sectarian divide.

Senior Leaders of The Islamic State Known to have been Detained at USMIL Camp Bucca

		Abu Bakr al Baghdadi aka Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Ali al Badri al Samarrai Leader of IS
		Abu Ayman al Iraqi aka Abu Mohammad al Sweidawi Senior Leader and Member of the Military Council Former Colonel in Saddam-era Air Force Intelligence
		Hajji Bakr aka Samir Abd Muhammad al Khlifawi Senior Leader of IS from 2009-2014 Killed in January 2014 in Syria
		Abu Lu'ay aka Abdul Wahid Khutnayer Ahmad Senior Security Official
		Abu Suja aka Abdul Rahman al Afari Coordinator of sponsorship program for orphans and families of martyrs

ISI

Many ex-Ba'athists still occupy leading positions in The Islamic State,³⁹ and the two groups continue to see sufficient coincidence of interest to overcome any ideological disagreement.⁴⁰ In July 2014, following the fall of Mosul, an audio recording purporting to be by Izzat al Douri, who became the leader of the Ba'ath party early in 2007 following the death of Saddam Hussein, praised several resistance groups, including the Islamic Army, the 1920s Brigades, the Jaysh al Mujahidun and, "above all, The Islamic State." Al Douri thanked its leader (without mentioning Abu Bakr by name) for issuing a pardon to all Iraqi soldiers and police who defected from the government.⁴¹

These defectors have all had to pledge allegiance to The Islamic State in order to survive. There must be a question mark therefore about the loyalty of these new recruits, and of other secularists who have joined The Islamic State for want of an alternative, including ex-Ba'athists in the leadership. The declaration of the Caliphate has given Abu Bakr more space to make his own decisions, and the campaign of assassination against opponents or potential opponents by his security department may have reduced any open opposition to his plans, but it will not have crushed it. The murder of senior Ba'athist leaders following the capture of Mosul will have had the desired effect of removing potential political rivals, and it will

³⁹ See below for details of IS leadership. Though not impossible, it is unlikely that the Ba'athist leaders of IS have adopted the zealous salafist/takfirist ideas of their colleagues with equal enthusiasm.

⁴⁰ There have been clashes between IS and Ba'athist groups but these are likely to have been inspired by political competition rather than ideology.

⁴¹ <http://www.hudson.org/research/10505-iraq-s-second-sunni-insurgency>.

have cowed others into submission; but it will not have reassured them about their longer term safety.⁴²

The Islamic State also relies on support from tribal leaders who offer their help more because they oppose their government than because they support the ambitions of Abu Bakr's Caliphate. But like the Ba'athists, many tribal leaders will bridle at the extremism of the salafist/takfiri members of the State, in particular of the several thousand foreigners among them who have no local ties and are the least considerate of local customs and social hierarchy.

But for the moment, Abu Bakr's fierce commitment to the violent salafist/takfiri beliefs that now define the movement, together with his ruthless and totalitarian mindset, have led him to a position of unchallenged authority. He has not needed to be a visionary or a natural leader, just strong enough to impose his will more effectively than anyone else.⁴³ Despite their falling out, Abu Bakr's long-term goals are virtually identical to those of the al Qaeda leadership; the tensions between them, which go back to the days of Zarqawi, have always been about leadership and tactics, not about long-term objectives.

Growing ambition

The name changes of Al Qaeda in Iraq, first to The Islamic State of Iraq, then to The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria, and subsequently to The Islamic State or the *Khilafa* (Caliphate), show more than the evolution of the group's geographical ambition, or a mere display of hubris. There is great religious significance for the salafist/takfiris in declaring an Islamic State, whether geographically limited or not. When Abu Bakr's predecessor, Abu Omar al Baghdadi, declared the formation of The Islamic State of Iraq in 2006 he regarded himself as the leader of all Muslims and the defender of their faith.⁴⁴ He was in many respects declaring a Caliphate, though he did not go so far as to say so, and his organization pointed out that it controlled as much territory as had the Prophet when he governed in Medina.

From a religious point of view The Islamic State should have as an early objective the conquest of the Hejaz as the location of the two holy places, Mecca and Medina, but it has

⁴² <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2014/07/08/Islamic-State-rounds-up-ex-Baathists-to-eliminate-potential-rivals-in-Iraq-s-Mosul.html>.

⁴³ How ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the world's most powerful jihadist leader <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/11/how-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-became-the-worlds-most-powerful-jihadi-leader/>

⁴⁴ See Abu Omar's speech of 22 December 2006.

not given this as its aim. The challenge to the religious authority of the king of Saudi Arabia is clear enough, but in purely political terms, Abu Bakr's group still reflects its origins as an Iraqi movement with Iraqi objectives though now with an increasing stake in Syria. The change of name to The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria was an attempt to capitalize on the energy created by the civil war in Syria and use it in support of the insurgency in Iraq, making a common cause of Sunni disaffection with the Shia regimes on both sides of the border - albeit that in Syria the Sunni comprise some 70% of the population whereas in Iraq they make up only about 30%. By changing its name to The Islamic State, Abu Bakr broadened the appeal of the movement beyond Syria and Iraq without necessarily changing its short-term objectives. The removal of the geographic limitations in the name reinforced his challenge to al Qaeda as the leader of global 'jihad' and gave further reason to foreign fighters to join him. According to a map produced by the US Department of Defense in mid-September 2014,⁴⁵ the US Government assesses the territorial ambition of The Islamic State to extend by 2016 to cover the Sunni areas of Iraq to the north and west of Baghdad, Syria excluding Damascus and the west of the country, and a small area of Northern Jordan.



Map used by Secretary Hagel in Congressional briefings, 16 September 2014.

On a practical level, the movement is determined to occupy territory wherever it can. The logical ancillary to this is to project the group as an ever-growing power and a popular slogan

⁴⁵ <http://www.c-span.org/video/?321417-1/secretary-hagel-general-dempsey-isis-threat>.

is *baqiyya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding).⁴⁶ By calling the group The Islamic State, and making a point of bulldozing the berm that separates Syria and Iraq and destroying border posts,⁴⁷ Abu Bakr has underlined his rejection of the colonial boundaries established by the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. This is calculated to appeal to three separate constituencies: the local tribes who span the border, the Arab nationalists who resent the continued colonial legacy of divide and rule, and those members of the Muslim Umma who believe that they should form one nation based on their shared faith.

Beyond increasing its territory, The Islamic State aims to consolidate its rule through proselytising its salafist/takfiri creed (*dawa*), imposing sharia-based rule in order to enhance its authority and build its apparent legitimacy, providing education as a form of indoctrination and recruitment,⁴⁸ and offering public services and humanitarian assistance in order to win public support.

The need for administrators

This transition from conquest to governance is essential to the sustainability of the Caliphate but presents it with its biggest challenge. Some technocrats will willingly support The Islamic State, others will be intimidated into doing so, but overall, finding the bureaucrats needed to run a city, let alone the territory currently occupied by The Islamic State requires a campaign of recruitment that is not helped by its violent reputation. Many existing technocrats will have fled The Islamic State's advance, and others will have fallen foul of its intolerance of anything less than full-throated support. For The Islamic State, loyalty is more important than governance, but it is governance that will determine its durability.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ See Aymenn al Tamimi http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_the_islamic_states_regional_strategy326

⁴⁷ ISIS breach of Iraq-Syria border merges two wars into one 'nightmarish reality' <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/18/isis-iraq-syria-two-wars-one-nightmare>.

⁴⁸ Education is purely religious and includes no secular schooling or vocational training.

⁴⁹ See also ISIS Governance in Syria, Charles Caris and Samuel Reynolds, the Institute for the Study of War, July 2014. http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS_Governance.pdf.

ISIS Leadership



Religious
Scholars

Caliph



Abu Bakr al Baghdadi

Shura Council

Sharia Council



Abu Muslim
al Afari
al Turkmani



Abu Ali
al Anbari



Abu Arkan
al Amiri



Omar
al Shishani



Abu Ayman
al Iraqi



Abu al Athir Amr
al Absi



Abu Muhammad
al Adnani



Councils

Provincial



Abu Muslim
al Afari al Turkmani

Military



Abu Ahmad al Alwani

Security and
Intelligence



Abu Ali al Anbari

Religious
Affairs



Abu Mohammed
al Aani

Finance



Muafaq Mustafa
Mohammed al Khamoush

Media



Abu al Athir Amr
al Absi

Notable officials

Bodyguard



Abu Yahya
al Iraqi

Coordinator of
guest houses
and suicide
bombers



Abdulla Ahmad
al-Mishhadani

Spokesman



Abu Muhammad
al Adnani

Supervises
IED
deployment



Khairy Abed Mahmoud
al Taey

Supervises
prisoners



Bashar Isma'el
al-Hammadani

Coordinates
the affairs
of women
and orphans



Abdul Rahman
al Afari

Chief of
logistics
and supplies



Fares Reif
al Naima

STRUCTURE⁵⁰

The Caliph



Abu Bakr al Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al Badri al Samarra'i)

The appointment of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al Badri al Samarra'i) to lead the Islamic State of Iraq in 2010 is reported by a defector from the group⁵¹ to have been a surprise to its other members, and to have been engineered by an ex-Colonel from the Iraqi Revolutionary Guard, Samir Abed Hamad al Obeidi al Dulaimi, or Samir Abd Muhammad al Khlifawi, also known as Haji Bakr or Abu Bakr al Iraqi. Haji Bakr was a secularist Ba'athist who initially attracted criticism from fellow members of the group for his lack of a proper beard and lax observance of other dictates of their religious practice.⁵² But his organizational skills, knowledge of the Iraqi Army and network of fellow ex-Ba'athists made him a valuable resource and by the time the two leaders of The Islamic State of Iraq,

⁵⁰ Information on the structure and leadership of The Islamic State is piecemeal and difficult to verify.

⁵¹ Known on Twitter as @wikibaghdady.

⁵² <http://english.al-akhbar.com/print/18186>

Abu Omar al Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al Masri, died in April 2010, he was the head of its main advisory body, the Shura Council. Hajji Bakr, like several of The Islamic State leadership, spent time in US custody (twice) at some point between 2003 and 2010.⁵³ He died fighting the Free Syrian Army North of Aleppo in early January 2014.⁵⁴



Hajji Bakr (Samir Abd Muhammad al Khlifawi aka Samir Abed Hamad al Obeidi al Dulaimi)

Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al Badri al Samarraï, also known as Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, Abu Du'a and Abu Awad, may not have even been a member of the Shura Council at the time he became head of the organization.⁵⁵ Little is known for certain about his career up to that point. He is thought to have been living in Fallujah and working as the imam or assistant imam at a mosque there.⁵⁶ He does not appear to have had any track record either as a fighter or as a leader, and one account of his earliest association with al Qaeda in Iraq was merely in the passive role of a 'live letter box,' whereby he would receive a package from one unidentified member of the group and hold it for collection by another.

Nonetheless, he was picked up by US forces in early 2004 and held in Camp Bucca on suspicion of support for al Qaeda,⁵⁷ and spent at least the rest of the year there.⁵⁸ He will have met many others opposed to the new Iraqi regime during his detention, both secularists

⁵³ According to the martyrdom notice published by The Islamic State, on one occasion spending four years in detention.

⁵⁴ ISIS confirms death of senior leader in Syria http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/02/isis_confirms_death.php.

⁵⁵ Details of Abu Bakr's biography are sketchy and sources often contradict one another.

⁵⁶ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/print/18186>.

⁵⁷ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/world/middleeast/us-actions-in-iraq-fueled-rise-of-a-rebel.html?_r=0.

⁵⁸ The length of time he spent there is disputed, with it varying from 10 months to 5 years.

and salafist/takfiris, and is likely to have been drawn deeper into the insurgency as a result. In any case, following his release, Abu Bakr must have become far more directly involved with The Islamic State of Iraq to be selected to lead the group by nine of the eleven members of its Shura Council in mid-2010.

One version of the Caliph's biography

Abu Bakr was born in Samarra in 1971.⁵⁹ His family was not well off and several of his relatives were preachers. Before moving to Fallujah, he studied at the Islamic University in Baghdad, living in a poor area some way from the center of the city and acting as an assistant prayer leader in the local mosque.⁶⁰ Accounts from people claiming to have been his classmates suggest that he was an outsider at school, not especially good at anything except soccer, which was the only time he joined in.⁶¹ He was not recorded by anyone as having charisma or showing leadership qualities. But nor was Mohammed Omar, who was a village Mullah, who rode to prominence on a wave of disgust at the antics of local warlords and adopted the cloak (quite literally) of religion as a way to bring about a new Afghanistan.⁶² In fact in both cases the very obscurity of the men may have provided them an advantage.

Another

An alternative and more generous biography, embellished by the propaganda machinery of The Islamic State in July 2013,⁶³ has it that Abu Bakr holds a doctorate in Islamic Sciences from the Islamic University in Baghdad, having done his PhD on *Tajweed* (elocution),⁶⁴ and became a Professor at Tikrit University.⁶⁵ It claims that he was an Imam at various mosques in Samarra, Baghdad, and Fallujah before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁶⁶ Following the invasion, it claims that he co-founded *Jamaat Jaysb Abl al Sunnah* (the Army of the Sunnah),

⁵⁹ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/print/20133>.

⁶⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27801676>.

⁶¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10948846/How-a-talented-footballer-became-worlds-most-wanted-man-Abu-Bakr-al-Baghdadi.html>.

⁶² Mullah Omar famously appeared in 1996 draped in what is believed to be the Prophet's cloak outside the Kandahar mosque where it is kept.

⁶³ <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/226-the-story-behind-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi>.

⁶⁴ Other versions add Islamic culture, sharia and fiqh. See: <http://www.takvahaber.net/halife-ebu-bekir-el-baghdadi-biyografi,13.html>.

⁶⁵ <http://tahrirsouri.com/2014/07/12/profile-the-rise-of-the-islamic-state-is/>

⁶⁶ Some also say that Abu Bakr was in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, which, together with the legacy of Zarqawi, may explain why The Islamic State apes certain characteristics of the Taliban regime at that time.

which operated in Samarra, Diyala, and Baghdad, and led its Sharia Council before his detention in Camp Bucca in January 2004.⁶⁷ Abu Bakr's group joined al Qaeda in Iraq and others as a founding member of the *Majlis Shura al Mujahidin* (the Mujahideen Shura Council) in early 2006, which then became The Islamic State of Iraq later that year. Abu Bakr became a member of the ISI Shura Council and the head of its sharia committee, and by the time of Abu Omar's death in April 2010, was the third most senior person in the organization, overseeing its military operations, having served as Sharia head or emir in al Anbar, Fallujah, Diyala, Baghdad and Samarra.⁶⁸ Coming from the al Badri clan, a sub clan of the Quraish, he had additional status as a putative descendant of the Prophet.⁶⁹ His predecessor, Abu Omar al Baghdadi had also claimed to be a member of the Quraish.

The Islamic State also claims that Abu Bakr is an active and effective military commander, leading his troops in battle and being wounded as a result.⁷⁰ This is inherently unlikely. Not only does Abu Bakr have no military background or experience, he is also intensely careful about his security and before his appearance in the Mosul mosque on 4 July 2014, few people even knew what he looked like. When commanders below the leadership level were called to meet him, it is said that they would be told he was present in the group but without his identity being specified.⁷¹ Abu Bakr's location is not exactly known, but he is thought to lead The Islamic State from Raqqa in Syria, though spending time also in Mosul.

As well as disputing his academic and religious qualifications, Abu Bakr's detractors say that he is not a true member of the Quraish and therefore not a descendant of the prophet, widely understood to be a prerequisite for anyone holding the position of Caliph. In addition, they say that between 2003 and 2006, rather than being an active member of AQI, he lived in Damascus at a safe distance from the Iraqi civil war. When he returned to Iraq, he joined the resistance through a brother-in-law, who was active in one of the groups that became part of ISI and so came to pledge allegiance to Abu Omar. Shortly afterwards he was arrested and on his release took on the post-box role described above.⁷²

⁶⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28560449>.

⁶⁸ <http://tahrirsouri.com/2014/07/12/profile-the-rise-of-the-islamic-state-is/>.

⁶⁹ Some Islamic scholars argue that the al Badri are outside the group that may claim descent from the Prophet. See also Nibras Kazimi on the necessity of the Caliph being from the Quraish. <http://www.hudson.org/research/9854-the-caliphate-attempted-zarqawi-s-ideological-heirs-their-choice-for-a-caliph-and-the-collapse-of-their-self-styled-islamic-state-of-iraq>.

⁷⁰ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/04/us-syria-crisis-raqqa-insight-idUSKBN0GZ0D120140904?irpc=932>.

⁷¹ <https://www.hate-speech.org/the-quest-for-the-caliphate/>.

⁷² Taken from 'The Hidden Truth about al-Baghdadi's State' by Abu Ahmed.

No doubt the truth lies somewhere in between these conflicting versions. But one thing is sure. Since his appointment as head of the organization, Abu Bakr has enhanced and consolidated his authority and control. He has had rivals killed and senior positions filled with his supporters. By his self-appointment as Caliph, he has claimed leadership not just of The Islamic State, but also of every other salafist/takfiri group in the world, as well, theoretically, of all Muslims; his position of course is disputed by almost everyone, but even al Qaeda is careful to acknowledge the achievements of the movement and cannot condemn it as heretical or deviant because its objectives are exactly in line with its own.

The second tier leadership

Although The Islamic State is a highly centralized and disciplined organization, its size and the extent of the territory it controls make delegation essential. Abu Bakr has two deputies: Abu Muslim al Turkmani (Fadil Ahmad Abdallah al Hayyali), who supervises the State in Iraq and is essentially the second man in the organization, and Abu Ali al Anbari, who oversees Islamic State operations in Syria.⁷³ Both men were formerly members of the Iraqi Ba'ath party, and, unusually, both are believed to be Turkmen.⁷⁴



Abu Muslim al Turkmani (Fadil Ahmad Abdallah al Hayyali)

Abu Muslim al Turkmani is from Tal Afar in North Western Iraq and is reported to have been a senior Special Forces officer and a member of military intelligence. He was a loyal Ba'athist, close to both Saddam Hussein and Izzat al Douri, and as a result was imprisoned for a long period following the US invasion of 2003. Abu Ali al Anbari, also known as Abu Ali Qurdash al Turkmani, Abu Jasim al Iraqi and Abu Umar Qurdash, is not from Anbar but

⁷³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10956280/Inside-the-leadership-of-Islamic-State-how-the-new-caliphate-is-run.html>.

⁷⁴ 'The Hidden Truth about al-Baghdadi's State' by Abu Ahmed. Saddam Hussein also had senior Turkmen in his close circle.

believed to be from Northern Iraq, in or around Mosul. He is reported to have been a physics teacher and a Ba'ath party activist before 2003. After 2003, he was briefly a member of Ansar al Islam, headed by Abu Musab al Zaraqawi.⁷⁵ According to one ex-member of The Islamic State, Abu Ali is also a member of the Shura Council. Another account puts him as head of the powerful Intelligence and Security Council.⁷⁶ He appears to have appointed Abu Yahya al Iraqi, who is with Abu Bakr at all times, to act as a channel between them.⁷⁷

The councils

Abu Bakr and his two senior advisors set the overall strategic objectives of the group, which are then passed down through the hierarchy with each lower rung having a degree of autonomy in their fulfillment. This is especially true in military operations where a local commander will know what he has to achieve, and even where to attack, but the exact timing and method may be left to his discretion.⁷⁸ This system of devolved authority has enabled The Islamic State to operate on many fronts at more or less the same time, both administratively and militarily. For example, in a two-week period spanning the end of July and the start of August 2014, it was engaged against the Iraqi Army, the Kurdish peshmerga, the Syrian Army, the Syrian opposition, and a tribal revolt, as well as in the general administration of its territory.

The Councils are responsible for the military and administrative organization of The Islamic State, providing advice to Abu Bakr and overseeing strategic planning, military operations, and civilian administration. The Shura Council is the highest advisory body and theoretically must approve Abu Bakr's appointments and even the choice of who should succeed him as Caliph, which is decided by the Sharia Council. Theoretically, it also has the power to dismiss the Caliph if he fails to carry out his duties in accordance with the guiding (sharia) principles of the organization.

The Shura Council is headed by Abu Arkan al Ameri and comprises between nine and 11 members,⁷⁹ all of whom are believed to be Iraqi and many of whom have a past association with the Ba'ath party. The Shura Council is responsible for conveying directives from Abu Bakr down the chain of command and for ensuring that they are carried out. It decides on

⁷⁵ 'The Hidden Truth about al-Baghdadi's State' by Abu Ahmed.

⁷⁶ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20599>.

⁷⁷ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18219>.

⁷⁸ <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/isils-political-military-power-in-iraq>.

⁷⁹ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20599>.

laws and their implementation and so may have an overlapping function with the Sharia Council, which decides on religious issues. It is likely that both Abu Muslim al Turkmani and Abu Ali al Anbari are members of the Shura Council, so too are Abu Ayman al Iraqi of the Military Council, Amr al Absi (Abu al Athir, Amru al Absi al Shami) in charge of media, and Abu Muhammad al Adnani al Shami, the spokesman of The Islamic State.

The Sharia Council is directly overseen by Abu Bakr and is the most powerful body of The Islamic State. It has six members. Its duties include selecting a Caliph and ensuring the compliance of all other parts of the administration with sharia law, according to its own interpretation.⁸⁰ With help from the Sharia Commissions, headed by Abu Mohammed al Aani, it is responsible for ensuring party discipline, providing rules and deciding penalties for their infringement, supervising the sharia police and courts and overseeing ideological outreach (*dawa*), both in areas under the State's control and beyond.

The imposition and enforcement of religious observance in behavior and appearance is both a symbol and instrument of Islamic State power. One of its first objectives in a newly secured area is to establish a sharia police force, the sole purpose of which is to supervise the Islamic conduct of the region. This is completely separate from the normal civilian police force. The sharia courts, however, deal with more than religious transgressions; complaints against alleged offenders, civil or religious, can be brought before the sharia courts by the police or by private citizens, and in a country where justice has been partial, sporadic, and subject to corruption, the sharia courts can be popular insofar as they avoid these defects. The more cases that the courts deal with, the more people are vested in the durability of their judgments and accept The Islamic State as the guarantor of their authority.

To back up its claims of legitimacy, The Islamic State has sought endorsement from religious scholars elsewhere and is reported to have recruited a Saudi officer, Bandar bin Sha'alan, to enlist respected preachers on its behalf. This effort led to The Islamic State appointing three principal sharia leaders:⁸¹ Omar al Qahtani, a Saudi national, who changed his name from Abu Hafs to Abu Bakr in homage to his leader; Turki al Benali, also known as Turki bin Mubarak bin Abdullah, Abu Dergham and Abu Humam Bakr Bin Abdul Aziz al Athari, who is based in Bahrain having been expelled from the United Arab Emirates for his salafist/takfiri preaching; and thirdly Osman al Nazeh al Asiri, a Saudi national who went to fight in Syria in early 2013 and was prominent in arguing the case for The Islamic State in its dispute

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ "The Islamic State: from Baghdadi the founder to Baghdadi the caliph" <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20599>.

with Jabhat al Nusra.⁸² Bandar bin Sha'alan has also recruited donors and coordinated the recruitment of fighters. He now plays an important role in the media effort of The Islamic State.

The Islamic State has many of the typical characteristics of totalitarianism, including zero tolerance of dissent. Thus the **Security and Intelligence Council**,⁸³ responsible for eliminating rivals to Abu Bakr and rooting out any incipient plots against him, has a vital role in maintaining and asserting his control, as well as ensuring his physical security. The Security Council has a network of branches throughout The Islamic State. Abu Ali al Anbari may be the head of this Council. On its foundation, the Security and Intelligence Council controlled about 20 people but it expanded fast under the sub-command of Abu Safwan al Rifai as it assassinated defectors and otherwise eliminated any challenges to the central authority of the organization, such as from local leaders, activists, or religious scholars. Abu Lu'ay (Abdul Wahid Khutnayer Ahmad) is believed to be a member of the Security Council.

The Military Council drives the campaign to win more territory and defend what is already held. In this it is helped by the **Provincial Council**, which oversees the civilian administration of the State through its 18 provinces. In addition, there are the **Finance Council**, the **Media Council**, and possibly a Council that looks after fighters and their families.

The current head of the **Military Council** is believed to be Abu Ahmad al Alwani (Waleed Jasem Mohammed al Alwani), an ex-member of Saddam Hussein's army, and so also a Ba'athist. He was previously the Council's Chief of Staff and before that responsible for Diyala Province. His predecessor was Abu Abdulrahman al Bilawi (Adnan Ismail Najm), a Captain in Saddam Hussein's army and, like Abu Bakr and Hajji Bakr, a former prisoner in the US detention centre at Camp Bucca. Al Bilawi was also head of the Shura Council and the senior military leader for Iraq. He died in a raid on his home by Iraqi Security Forces on 5 June 2014. The campaign to capture Mosul, launched immediately after his death, was named in his honor, and the detailed long-term planning for the operation was likely to have been his responsibility.⁸⁴

Another member of the Military Council, or possibly its head given his reported position on the Shura Council, is Abu Muhanad al Sweidawi (Adnan Latif Hamid al Sweidawi), also

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ These may be two separate Councils.

⁸⁴ How an arrest in Iraq revealed Isis's \$2bn jihadist network <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/iraq-isis-arrest-jihadists-wealth-power>.

known as Abu Ayman al Iraqi, an ex-Lt. Colonel in Saddam Hussein's air defense intelligence and a close Ba'athist ally of Izzat al Douri. He was imprisoned by US forces between 2007 and 2010. In early 2014 Abu Ayman was in charge of operations in Western Syria, and at some point was The Islamic State's governor of al Anbar. He has a wide reputation for almost pathological violence.



Omar al Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili)

The successor to Abu Ahmad al Awlani, now head of the Military Council, as Chief of Staff is believed to be Omar al Shishani (Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili),⁸⁵ an ex-Georgian army sergeant born in 1986 to a Christian father and Muslim mother from Chechnya,⁸⁶ who arrived in Syria in March 2012 and has become a much-photographed senior military leader associated with many of The Islamic State's most significant military victories. He initially led a well trained and battle hardened group of Chechens, *Jaish al Muhajireen wa al Ansar*, before swearing allegiance to Abu Bakr in mid-2013. He is described by The Islamic State as its military Commander. He may also be a member of the Shura Council,⁸⁷ but this would be unusual for a non-Iraqi and the leadership is more likely to want him on the battlefield than allow him to build any political base. Nonetheless, The Islamic State has tweeted pictures of Omar al Shishani accepting pledges of allegiance on behalf of Abu Bakr, which is a sure sign of his seniority.

⁸⁵ See <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28217590> for an interview with Omar al Shishani's father and <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303309504579181962177007316> for a profile.

⁸⁶ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-10-08/how-islamic-state-grooms-chechen-fighters-against-putin.html>.

⁸⁷ <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2651.aspx>.

Other members or assistants of the Military Council are Abu Shema (Fares Reif al Naima), who is in charge of supplies; Abu Suja (Abdul Rahman al Afari) who is responsible for the families of dead fighters; Abu Kifah (Khairy Abed Mahmoud al Taey), who is in charge of explosives and their deployment; Tariq Bin al Tahar Bin al Falih al Awni al Harzi, a Tunisian who arranges the movement of fighters,⁸⁸ and Abu Qasim (Abdullah Ahmad al Meshadani), responsible for foreign fighters.

Other senior figures

Apart from its most senior members, the names, positions, and duties of individuals reported to hold leadership roles in The Islamic State are hard to verify, and even if a report is accurate one day, it may change the next. Other names that have been mentioned as members of councils or as provincial governors have included Abu Abdul Qadr (Shaukat Hazem al Farhat); Abu Mohammed (Bashar Ismail al Hamdani); Abu Hajar al Assafi (Mohammed Hamid al Duleimi); Abu Nabil (Wissam Abed Zaid al Zubeidi); Abu Fatma (Nena Abed Naif al Jubouri); Abu Fatma (Ahmed Mohsin Khalal al Jihashni); Abu Mayasara (Ahmed Abdul Kader al Jazza), and Abu Juma (Radhwan Talib Hussein al Hamduni).⁸⁹

The Provincial Council is under the overall control of Abu Muslim al Turkmani, who also has responsibility for The Islamic State activities in Iraq while Abu Ali al Anbari oversees its actions in Syria. The State is divided into 18 provinces (*Wilayat*) comprising Anbar; Baghdad; Diyala; Fallujah;⁹⁰ al Janoub (the South); Kirkuk; Nineveh, and Salahuddin in Iraq; and Aleppo; al Badiyah (Homs); al Baraka (Hasaka); Damascus; Hama; Idlib; al Khair (Deir ez Zour); al Raqqa, and al Sahel (Latakia) in Syria,⁹¹ with an additional province, al Furat (the Euphrates), spanning the border.⁹²

Each province has a governor (*Wali*) who presides over a local structure that mirrors the central structure of the organization but focuses in particular on civilian administration. Inevitably, some central organs such as the Security Council and the Sharia Council have

⁸⁸ <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2651.aspx>.

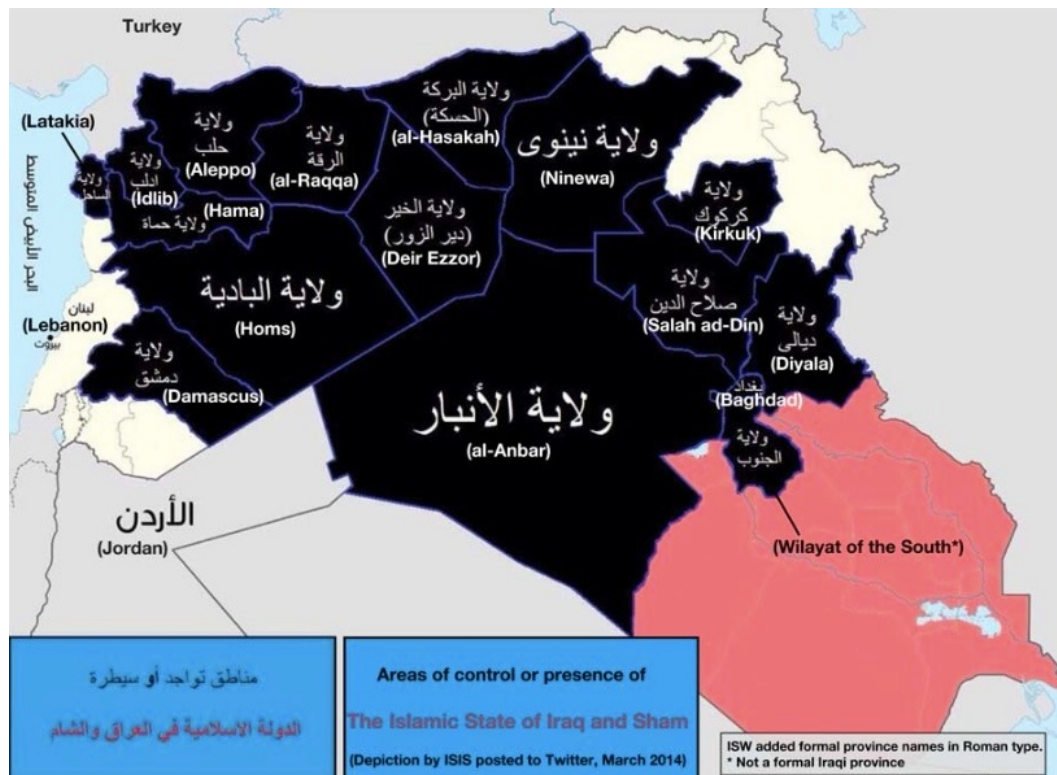
⁸⁹ These reports all seem to originate with <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10956193/Revealed-the-Islamic-State-cabinet-from-finance-minister-to-suicide-bomb-deployer.html>.

⁹⁰ See Dabiq issue 4.

⁹¹ Islamic State Twitter account March 2014, since disabled. But see also: <http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/islamic-state-iraq-islamic-state-iraq-and-sham-isis>.

⁹² Islamic State announcement, accessed 19 September 2014. See also <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2014/09/islamic-state-euphrates-province-statement>.

their own offices and representatives in each province that operate independently from and with greater authority than their provincial counterparts, but otherwise the pattern of government at provincial and then at district level is a repeat of the pattern at State level. In Aleppo for example, the *Wali* is supported by a sharia commander, a military commander and a security commander; beneath him, the province is divided into sectors with a similar triumvirate, and the same pattern repeats itself at town level.



Map produced by The Islamic State to show its presence and administrative divisions in March 2014, before the creation of Furat and Fallujah provinces

MILITARY OPERATIONS

For all that it has several ex-members of Saddam's military in its top ranks, The Islamic State has shown some strategic weakness, especially in the way that it has often dissipated its effort by attacking multiple targets, some of limited value. In the field, it is particularly reliant on suicide bombers and the skills of certain military commanders, such as Omar al Shishani, who has shown consistent ability to take the enemy by surprise.⁹³ However, it does have two other strengths: the enthusiasm and determination of its fighters and its reputation for violence.

Estimates of the military strength of The Islamic State vary from a few thousand to tens of thousands, with the CIA reportedly giving a bracket of between 20,000 and 31,500 in September 2014.⁹⁴ It is of course difficult to estimate the group's actual strength and capability as some fighters may be members of tribal militias, others may be coerced and many may be relatively untrained. Nonetheless, it reportedly took just 800 men to capture Mosul and the flexibility and coordination of its military actions demonstrate both strategic and tactical ability.⁹⁵ Sub-commanders are given a degree of latitude in the field that is unusual in the Middle East,⁹⁶ and many of its fighters are reported to show a degree of commitment and fearlessness that helps overcome any deficiency in training. For so long as there are no effective ground forces deployed against it, The Islamic State is also likely to retain the support of the tribal militias in areas under its control.

Its military strategy focuses on gaining territory, but not just in order to increase the size of the State; the territory occupied and targeted by The Islamic State reflects its recognition of the importance of resources. The Islamic State now occupies much of those parts of Iraq and Syria occupied by Sunni Arabs, but where it has attacked beyond the Arab Sunni heartlands it has been to capture oil fields, water resources, dams (for power and water), and grain silos. For example, this may have been one of the reasons for The Islamic State's sustained attack on Kobani in October 2014, despite suffering heavy losses. Apart from some possible advantage in controlling a border town to facilitate the movement of troops and supplies from Turkey and to deny that advantage to the Kurds, a further objective

⁹³ <http://warontherocks.com/2014/10/the-islamic-states-anbar-offensive-and-abu-umar-al-shishani/>.

⁹⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-weakens-al-qaeda-groups-around-the-world-but-hasnt-wiped-any-out/2014/09/11/3c28d626-39bb-11e4-8601-97ba88884ffd_story.html?hpid=z1.

⁹⁵ <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/isils-political-military-power-in-iraq>.

⁹⁶ <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-and-the-theory-and-practice-of-jihad>.

appears to have been to capture grain silos, a much more important target with a direct impact on the self-sufficiency of the State and on the strength of its opponents. According to some reports,⁹⁷ by October 2014, The Islamic State controlled land in Iraq that accounted for about 40% of national wheat production, as well as areas of Syria that have traditionally exported wheat across the border, so causing the cancellation of major sales.



Picture tweeted by The Islamic State during the battle for Kobani, October 2014

The military tactics of The Islamic State include acts of terrorism, insurgency operations, and more conventional military action. Generally, the State softens its targets through a campaign of terrorist attacks, then infiltrates the population and the defending forces, gradually gains control of some areas of the target, and then launches an assault on the rest. Its capture of Raqqa was an example of this.

In order to be able to declare a caliphate The Islamic State had to have a capital city, and in August 2013, it began to battle other rebel groups for control of Raqqa, the sixth largest city in Syria. Raqqa was the capital city of the Abbasid Caliphate from 796 to 809 AD, and therefore a symbolically significant location from which Abu Bakr could launch his own caliphate. Fighting between The Islamic State and rebel groups such as Ahrar al Sham, the Grandsons of the Prophet Brigade, and Jabhat al Nusra continued for months, with The Islamic State perfecting tactics of assassination and false alliances with sections of the

⁹⁷ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/30/us-mideast-crisis-wheat-idUSKCN0HP12J20140930?irpc=932>.

opposition to ensure that it did not unite against it. These tactics allowed the group to make a successful assault on the remaining patches of resistance in January 2014.

In August 2013, ISIS published a report (*al Naba*) which provided a candid examination of its operational activity for the Muslim year 1433H, which ran from November 2011 to November 2012.⁹⁸ It referred to this as its fourth annual report, though no earlier one has appeared online. In March 2014, it published a further report, labelled as its fifth, covering the period November 2012 to November 2013.⁹⁹ The detail in these reports, as well as the reports themselves, suggest a high degree of command and control. They also suggest situational awareness and flexibility of approach to targeting and method of attack, using parked vehicle bombs in one area, for example, and suicide bombings or assassinations in another, depending on the operational environment and objectives. The reports also show a steady increase in capability, with 4,500 operations recorded for 2011/2012, and over twice that number the following year.

These reports were, of course, published in order to advertise the reach and capability of the group so as to maintain morale, attract donors, and impress potential recruits, but they also provide a reasonably accurate picture of what the group was able to achieve during the periods covered. A comparison of the operational claims of The Islamic State in its fifth report with contemporary press coverage of attacks in Baghdad conducted by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, found an impressive coincidence of data.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, the pattern of such war reporting, whether by state or non-state actors, usually begins with basically accurate accounts of the fighting and then deteriorates into wishful thinking, especially when things start going wrong or progress slows.¹⁰¹ For the moment, The Islamic State seems to be sticking - more or less - to the facts.

As pointed out in a study of the reports, conducted by the Institute for the Study of War,¹⁰² the tactics revealed by the operational digests show The Islamic State following a typical insurgency strategy of 'clear, hold and build,' and demonstrate the long-term planning and

⁹⁸ <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shc481m-22harvest-of-operations-for-the-year-1433-h-in-iraq22.pdf>.

⁹⁹ See analysis in: ISIS Annual Report Reveal A Metrics-Driven Military Command <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ISIS-Annual-Reports-Reveal-Military-Organization>.

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-state-in-iraq-and-the-levant-more-than-just-a-june-surprise>.

¹⁰¹ A trend that was observable, for example, in Taliban reporting from Afghanistan in the period 2003 to 2013.

¹⁰² See Institute for the Study of War 'Backgrounder' by Alex Bilger 22 May 2014. http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISWBackgrounder_ISIS_Annual_Reports_0.pdf.

preparation behind the capture of Nineveh Province and its capital Mosul in June 2014.¹⁰³ This is not the work of neophyte enthusiasts inspired by their imagined rewards of martyrdom, it is clearly the result of detailed planning by people who know Iraq well, have prior experience and training, and are able to manage an organization with discipline and secrecy; all characteristics of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist supporters.

Responding to the international coalition

The engagement of the United States and its allies in a coalition against The Islamic State from August 2014 has brought about a dramatic change in the dynamics of the battlefield, particularly in Iraq. The Islamic State was likely right to believe that it could have held on to the key resource of the Mosul Dam indefinitely were it not for US airstrikes. The electricity and water flowing from the dam are the lifeblood of Mosul and its loss will challenge The State's hold on the city. The Islamic State is also having to explain and cope with territorial set backs after a period of unchallenged expansion and apparent invincibility, and the 'Message to America' video that it released on 19 August 2014 showing the murder of the US hostage James Foley makes clear that his death was in revenge for those attacks and a warning to the US to interfere no further. Subsequent beheading videos have reinforced this message.

It seems likely that The Islamic State fears that US and allied airstrikes could tip the balance against it. Coalition airstrikes have made moving men and materiel harder as well as the safe storage of military equipment and attacks on targets with conventional tactics. They have also boosted the morale of opposing Iraqi and Kurdish forces while sapping that of its own. The Islamic State will have to find ways to hide deeper within the civilian population and hope that the airstrikes quickly run out of obvious targets and begin to occur civilian casualties. Paradoxically, The Islamic State would no doubt feel more comfortable facing US ground forces as it is familiar with their capabilities and can leverage its own advantages of local knowledge and guerrilla tactics. In fact Abu Bakr broadcast an audio message to America in January 2014 that said in part *"Know, O defender of the cross, that a proxy war won't help you in Sham just as it didn't help you in Iraq. As for the near future, you will be forced into a direct confrontation, with Allah's permission, despite your reluctance. And the sons of Islam have prepared themselves for this day, so wait and see, for we too are also going to wait and see."*¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ About a third of all attacks in the two reports took place in Nineveh.

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.blueforcetracker.com/article/ISIS-propaganda-video-transcript>. 'The Islamic State English language online magazine, *Dabiq*, regularly conveys similar messages.

The airstrikes may also make The Islamic State more ready to cooperate rather than fight with other rebel groups in Syria as it may calculate that the more it attacks the regime, rather than just accrete territory at the expense of weaker rivals, the less obvious a target it may be and the less easy to hit if other rebel groups are fighting alongside. Attacks focused on the Syrian Army may also make Turkey and other opponents of Bashar al Assad in the Gulf less active in support of the US-led coalition. Furthermore, as noted above, both Jabhat al Nusra and The Islamic State will use attacks by the US and other Western powers to reinforce their recruiting narrative that non-Muslim majority states are ganging up to protect corrupt regimes in the Muslim world and that their own fight is in defense of Islam.

Airstrikes have also changed the messaging of The Islamic State to its supporters overseas. Earlier, it had urged people to come to Syria and Iraq to help build the new State rather than create small cells to attack targets in their home countries.¹⁰⁵ In late September 2014 however, this messaging changed with The Islamic State spokesman, Abu Mohammad al Adnani, urging attacks on Westerners or citizens from member countries of the international coalition wherever they were and by whatever means possible.¹⁰⁶ This statement was something of a rant, but provided yet another example of the fierce reaction of the State to the coalition, and has been repeated subsequently by other members of the group.¹⁰⁷

Threatening terrorist attacks elsewhere

Although The Islamic State has threatened countries outside Iraq and Syria since its earliest days, al Adnani's call for attacks against the coalition does not signify a change in its immediate strategic objectives. The military ambition of the State remains the capture and control of further territory in Iraq and Syria, and the consolidation of what it already has. In due course it may try to move into Jordan and Lebanon, where it already has supporters, and then into Saudi Arabia, but it does not seem to be making plans to do more. Unlike al Qaeda therefore, it does not appear to have set up camps within its territory to attract and train foreign recruits to commit terrorist acts elsewhere. Although there have been several cells discovered abroad that have apparently been identifying and facilitating the travel of foreign fighters to join The Islamic State, which suggests an organized network of supporters, by late October 2014, no plot or attack had been identified outside the Levant that had been planned or directed from within the State, notwithstanding that some individuals with a

¹⁰⁵ https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Dabiq%20Backgrounder_Harleen%20Final.pdf

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-urges-more-attacks-on-western-disbelievers-9749512.html>.

¹⁰⁷ For example, Abu Saeed al Britani on 3 October 2014. [https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/british-is-fighter-addresses-
cameron-calls-for-lone-wolf-attacks-in-britain.html](https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/british-is-fighter-addresses-cameron-calls-for-lone-wolf-attacks-in-britain.html).

connection to The Islamic State had been responsible for or involved in the planning or perpetration of terrorist acts elsewhere.¹⁰⁸

The Islamic State has in any case already established a reputation for ruthless and indiscriminate violence, and it hardly need do more to turn the rest of the world against it. It is more in the administration of territory that its longevity will depend.

¹⁰⁸ For example Mehdi Nemmouche, who is reported to have spent a year with The Islamic State before killing four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels on 24 May 2014.

ADMINISTRATIVE OPERATIONS

The Islamic State has two objectives in the administration of territory it holds: to establish its salafist/takfiri concept of perfect government, and to win more support for its project. In its attempt to win the support of existing residents in its Syrian provinces, The Islamic State claimed to provide an alternative to the endemic corruption and poor governance of the Assad regime. However, the extent of The Islamic State's intrusion into the daily lives of the people, the enforcement of rules about appearance and behavior, and the savagery of punishment for transgression, have increasingly resulted in popular acquiescence through fear rather than any enthusiastic embrace of the new order. It is a feature of The Islamic State that it keeps meticulous records,¹⁰⁹ so making administrative consistency easier but at the same time facilitating its control of the public.

The picture is much the same in Iraq, with The Islamic State taking every advantage of the widespread disaffection in the Sunni areas of the country with the discriminatory practices of the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. The longer that The Islamic State is able to administer Iraqi territory and so reverse the loss of wealth and influence that the population under its control has suffered since 2003, the greater its support will be and the harder to uproot it. Local people will want to keep hold of what they have regained and will instinctively lack trust in any promises or assurances from Baghdad that they will benefit still more if they rise up against the new state. The Islamic State is significantly dependent on support from the Sunni tribes and has set up tribal affairs departments within its provincial administration to deal with problems of security, property disputes, and the distribution of resources, in conjunction with tribal elders, which suggests that it has learned from Baghdad's mistakes.¹¹⁰

In the administration of its territory, The Islamic State follows the hierarchical pattern of its military structure with delegation down the chain of command. The provincial system allows a measure of independence to local governors who seem to be moved from place to place with some frequency, perhaps to ensure consistency and avoid the growth of power bases independent of the central leadership. Below the level of governor, the provinces have an administrative stream and a services stream.¹¹¹ The first covers security, law enforcement, religious education and what little non-religious education is allowed, and tribal affairs, while

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/iraq-isis-arrest-jihadists-wealth-power>.

¹¹⁰ http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Dabiq%20Background_Harleen%20Final.pdf

¹¹¹ http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS_Governance.pdf.

the second, the Islamic Administration of Public Services, also known as the General Services Committee, looks after the region's infrastructure including electricity, sanitation, water, agricultural irrigation systems, cleaning and repairing roads, and other essential services such as the production of bread. In this respect, through the seizure of grain stores it has reportedly been able to lower prices and keep bakeries running.¹¹² But as many farmers have fled their land, the crop for next year remains unplanted.¹¹³

Its monopoly of services provides the State with a further means of control over the population and an opportunity to penalize dissent.¹¹⁴ The Islamic State is intolerant of any opposition or divergence from its worldview, and has set up networks of informers and a heavy security apparatus, managed from the center, to ensure that no challenge to its authority can grow. In this it follows the well-trodden path of other totalitarian states. Civilians who at first may have welcomed the respite from the anxieties of war offered by Islamic State government,¹¹⁵ have in some measure begun to see it as merely a new form of oppression.¹¹⁶ The hostility of The Islamic State to individuality has also driven away many members of the professional classes, leaving hospitals without staff or medicines and schools without teachers.¹¹⁷

There will be many further problems if the State can no longer maintain its general infrastructure, particularly through the winter months, and at the beginning of July 2014 Abu Bakr appealed for “*scientists, scholars, preachers, judges, doctors, engineers and people with military and administrative expertise of all domains*” to move to The Islamic State which was in great need of their services.¹¹⁸ In its online magazine *Dabiq*, new recruits were assured homes ‘for you and your families’ in an effort to portray a settled and welcoming environment.¹¹⁹ In this respect, The Islamic State is trying to extend its appeal through its propaganda by balancing the images of its fighters beheading hostages with a more gentle projection of civilian

¹¹² <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/30/us-mideast-crisis-wheat-idUSKCN0HP12J20140930>.

¹¹³ <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSKCN0HP12J20140930?i=2&irpc=932>.

¹¹⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29004253>.

¹¹⁵ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/04/us-syria-crisis-raqqa-insight-idUSKBN0GZ0D120140904>.

¹¹⁶ <http://www.wsj.com/video/life-inside-the-isis-home-base-of-raqqa-syria/AA8CB9E3-B6A9-49AB-A2C9-F8E843413B85.html>.

¹¹⁷ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/08/syria-raqqa-state-situation.html#>.

¹¹⁸ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/07/iraq-syria-baghdadi-call-muslims-caliphate.html##ixzz3CHcbY6ZL>.

¹¹⁹ Issue 3 of *Dabiq* was titled ‘A Call to Hijra’ (migration) and much of its content was aimed at persuading new recruits to join the State.

policemen going about their duties, even to the extent of writing tickets for traffic violations.¹²⁰

So far as the local population is concerned, the projection of The Islamic State as a functioning body capable of providing services and maintaining order has great impact. Beforehand, in the Sunni areas of Syria and Iraq, state officials were all too often associated with corruption and misgovernment. This legacy of misrule also reduces the negative reaction of the Sunni population to videos of the mass murder of Syrian and Iraqi soldiers, or others that it sees as former oppressors.

A further motivation offered to fighters, especially from abroad, is the opportunity for material gain in the form of plunder, and the opportunity to purchase enslaved women. Issue 4 of *Dabiq*, released in early October 2014, goes into this at some length, attempting to justify by reference to Islamic texts the seizure of property owned or abandoned by those who do not support the ideology and objectives of The Islamic State and similarly trying to excuse the grotesque mistreatment of captured women and girls who it regards as mere commodities along with other spoils of war.



A sign marking a house as owned by a Christian (nasrani) and now the property of The Islamic State

The exploitation of religion both as a tool for indoctrination and motivation, and as a means of control, is an essential part of the administrative model of The Islamic State. One of its first objectives in capturing new territory is to establish centers from which it can spread its

¹²⁰ <http://www.businessinsider.co.id/is-traffic-ticket-2014-9/#%2EVBqB56PRhCY>.

particular creed (*dama*). The salafist/takfiri interpretation of Islam proselytized by The Islamic State underpins its authority as a State and the authority of its courts to enforce its sharia rules, aided by the religious police (*al hisbah* for men and *al kbansa* for women).¹²¹ Thus the sharia departments, at both state and provincial level, are possibly the most important part of the administrative structure in helping the State to exert and maintain control.

The focus on religion is also evident in the education system, so far as it exists. Schools teach little more than the main Islamic subjects of *aqida* (belief), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *sira* (life of the Prophet). There appears to be no provision for general education or vocational training. Artistic expression is considered of no importance and music is banned. The Islamic State therefore appears keener to ensure that the next generation is fully indoctrinated into its propaganda and accepts its salafist/takfiri interpretation of Islam, than it is capable of performing any useful function in society.

¹²¹ An example of *al hisbah*'s duties can be seen here. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6JKWFGHC58>

FINANCIAL OPERATIONS

Even accounting for deliberately misleading propaganda and distorted reporting, there is little doubt that the financial resources of The Islamic State will allow it to consolidate its territory and build its support in both Iraq and Syria for the foreseeable future, even if its income declines for the lack of technical expertise or the denial of territory and resources as a result of local or international action.¹²² The bottom line for The Islamic State is whether its revenues cover its essential expenditures, and this appears to be the case, even if the exact amounts involved are unknowable. In mid 2014, external estimates of its income were consistently in the range of \$3 million per day,¹²³ and its assets were calculated at between \$1.3 and \$2 billion.¹²⁴

Against this income, The Islamic State has to pay to keep its war-machine going, including by supplying and maintaining equipment, rewarding successful operations, and providing salaries to its living fighters and benefits to the dependents of those who have died. There could be over 30,000 fighters,¹²⁵ who are said to receive anything from \$200 a month,¹²⁶ to \$600 a month,¹²⁷ depending on nationality and size of family, which, if true is a significant increase over the \$41 per month they received prior to 2010.¹²⁸ In addition, the fighters receive free housing, generally by being allocated accommodation confiscated from Shia, Christians, and other non-Sunni inhabitants, as well as from Sunnis who have decided to flee.¹²⁹

The State also has to maintain the civilian infrastructure of the towns and villages it has captured and pay an increasing army of employees to manage its administration. Monthly salaries range from \$300 to as much as \$2,000 for those in senior management positions.¹³⁰

¹²² See for example UNSC res 2170 (2014) [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2170%20\(2014\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2170%20(2014))

¹²³ <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/islamic-state-groups-war-chest-growing-daily-0>.

¹²⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/iraq-isis-arrest-jihadists-wealth-power>.

¹²⁵ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-weakens-al-qaeda-groups-around-the-world-but-hasnt-wiped-any-out/2014/09/11/3c28d626-39bb-11e4-8601-97ba88884ffd_story.html?hpid=z1.

¹²⁶ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/security/2013/11/syria-islamic-state-iraq-sham-growth.html#>.

¹²⁷ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/04/us-syria-crisis-raqqa-insight-idUSKBN0GZ0D120140904?irpc=932>.

¹²⁸ http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2014/06/23/231223_records-show-how-iraqi-extremists.html?rh=1.

¹²⁹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/04/us-syria-crisis-raqqa-insight-idUSKBN0GZ0D120140904>.

¹³⁰ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/11052919/How-Isil-is-funded-trained-and-operating-in-Iraq-and-Syria.html>.

In addition it must pay for its propaganda campaign and bribes and inducements to tribal leaders and others whom it needs to influence and cannot merely kill. All in all, its expenses may equate to those of the Iraqi government before The Islamic State took control.¹³¹

Documents seized from the house of Abdulrahman al Bilawi in June 2014 suggest that The Islamic State had around \$875 million in cash and assets before the fall of Mosul earlier that month.¹³² Although discounted by the governor of Nineveh and bank officials,¹³³ it is widely reported that the group seized up to an additional \$430 million from the Central Bank in Mosul and other financial institutions after their capture.¹³⁴ In addition, The Islamic State has seized enormous amounts of government property, including military equipment abandoned by the Iraqi Army.¹³⁵

The main sources of income are oil production facilities in Syria and Iraq, and extortion/taxation of owners and producers in areas under its control.¹³⁶ This ranges from preying on small family businesses such as grocery stores or appliance repair shops to taxing large enterprises such as electric companies and other energy suppliers, cellular phone service providers, water delivery companies or others fulfilling government contracts. For example, The Islamic State has threatened to blow up cell phone towers unless the parent company pays protection money; the same for electricity substations and utility poles.¹³⁷ The Islamic State has also profited from the sale of goods produced by factories that it has requisitioned or farms that it has seized, as well as of equipment stripped from facilities that it has decommissioned. In addition, The Islamic State has continued the criminal practices of its predecessor groups in ransacking and appropriating the wealth of entire neighborhoods if they are occupied by Shia, Christians, Yazidis, government supporters or employees, or anyone else that The Islamic State decides is an enemy.¹³⁸ The few non-Muslims who

¹³¹ http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/09/to-defeat-isil-follow-the-money-110825_Page2.html#.VC7oBEu4klJ.

¹³² <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/iraq-isis-arrest-jihadists-wealth-power>.

¹³³ <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0378d4f4-0c28-11e4-9080-00144feabdc0.html?siteedition=intl#axzz39RGQaXwM>.

¹³⁴ ISIS just stole \$425 million, Iraqi governor says, and became the 'world's richest terrorist group' <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/12/isis-just-stole-425-million-and-became-the-worlds-richest-terrorist-group/>.

¹³⁵ Inside the leadership of The Islamic State: how the new 'caliphate' is run <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10956280/Inside-the-leadership-of-Islamic-State-how-the-new-caliphate-is-run.html>.

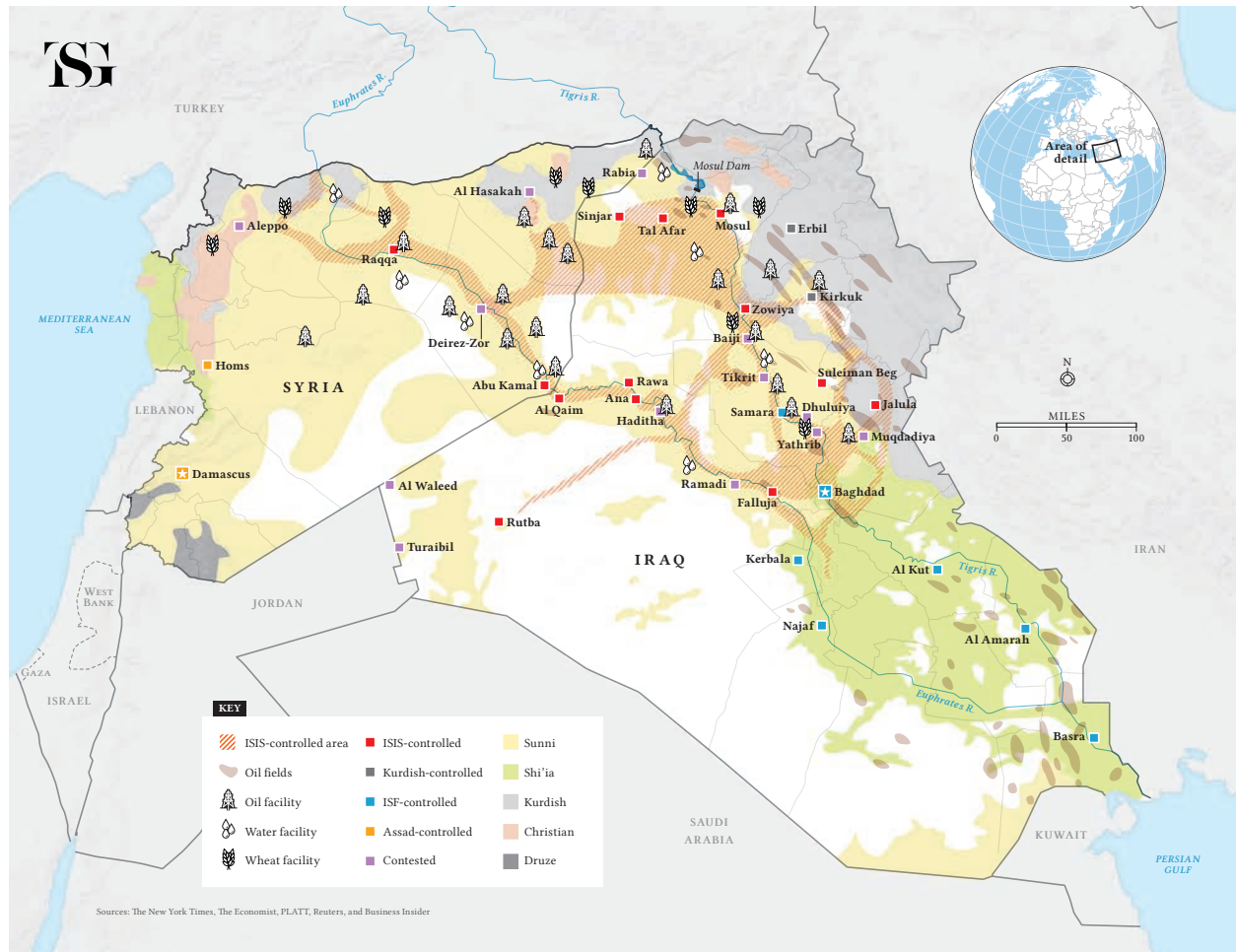
¹³⁶ <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/oil-extortion-crime-where-isis-gets-its-money-n200991>.

¹³⁷ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/07/28/baghdadis_hillbillies_isis_iraq_syria_oil_terrorism_islamic_state.

¹³⁸ <http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2014/09/16/داعش-يطالب-تجار-الموصل-بتسليم-نصيب-المسيحيين-والشيعة.html>.

THE ISLAMIC STATE

continue to live in areas under the control of The Islamic State are obliged to pay *jizya*, a head tax of approximately \$720 per adult male.¹³⁹



Critical Resources in Iraq and Syria Controlled by The Islamic State.

Oil production from facilities under the control of The Islamic State is estimated at between 30,000 and 80,000 bpd,¹⁴⁰ not including what it is syphoning from the now closed pipeline linking Iraq and Syria. Even if sold at the heavily discounted price of \$25-\$50 per barrel, this would provide a daily income of \$2-\$4 million. Oil fields, however, are not straightforward to run and need regular and specialist maintenance. This income stream may therefore be

¹³⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10666257/Militant-Islamist-group-in-Syria-orders-Christians-to-pay-protection-tax.html>.

¹⁴⁰ <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/18/business/al-khatteeb-isis-oil-iraq/index.html>.
The Islamic State is the Newest Petrostate http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/07/28/baghdadis_hillbillies_isis_iraq_syria_oil_terrorism_islamic_state

unsustainable in the longer term, especially as oil resources are targeted by coalition airstrikes. But for the moment, the flow continues and there is no shortage of buyers, including from the Syrian state.¹⁴¹ The United States estimate in early September 2014 of Islamic State income from 'illicit oil sales, smuggling and ransom payments' at about \$1 million per day therefore seems low.¹⁴²

A further source of income is exacting tolls on highways or otherwise robbing passing traffic at checkpoints. For example, it is reported that each large truck entering Mosul must pay \$400, while smaller commercial vehicles pay \$100 or \$50.¹⁴³ By seizing transit choke points and key supply routes, The Islamic State has extorted large amounts from truck drivers in both Iraq and Syria. This too was a tactic employed by its predecessor groups. Highways between Syria and Iraq were early targets for al Qaeda in Iraq, as were roads between Iraq and Jordan. Since seizing territory in northern Syria, The Islamic State has established a toll system on roads leading into Turkey, while its gains near Mosul and further South in Iraq have given it temporary control of roads leading into Iran and the Kurdish Autonomous Region.¹⁴⁴

In addition, The Islamic State has adopted the popular terrorist moneymaking enterprise of kidnapping for ransom, particularly foreigners.¹⁴⁵ The release of four French hostages in 2014 may have netted as much as \$18 million,¹⁴⁶ with the total revenue from ransoms by then being in the region of \$65 million.¹⁴⁷ Donations, especially from individuals in the Gulf, still provide some support, but even in 2010, they accounted for less than 5% of its income.¹⁴⁸ Donors in Iraq, who are both more accessible and more persuadable, have been

¹⁴¹ <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/09/to-defeat-isil-follow-the-money-110825.html#.VC7tL0u4kII>.

¹⁴² http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/al-qaida-overshadowed-by-islamic-states-influence/2014/09/05/0e60f3a4-3524-11e4-9f4d-24103cb8b742_story.html.

¹⁴³ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/energy/2014/07/23/Oil-smuggling-finances-Islamic-State-s-new-caliphate.html>.

¹⁴⁴ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/energy/2014/07/23/Oil-smuggling-finances-Islamic-State-s-new-caliphate.html>.

¹⁴⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html?_r=0.

¹⁴⁶ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Sep-12/270435-understanding-where-isis-gets-its-funding.ashx#axzz3F7XMZXac>.

¹⁴⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/11052919/How-Isil-is-funded-trained-and-operating-in-Iraq-and-Syria.html>.

¹⁴⁸ http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2014/06/23/231223_records-show-how-iraqi-extremists.html?rh=1

traditionally a far more lucrative source of revenue.¹⁴⁹ There is no evidence of any State providing direct financial support.¹⁵⁰

A snapshot of revenue streams as of late July 2014, based on available information suggests that The Islamic State had an income of \$8 million a month from extortion and tolls in Mosul alone, even before it took full control of the city.¹⁵¹ It was no doubt able to run similar rackets in Raqqa, Syria, and the surrounding area. It also received \$1-\$2 million a day from at least 30,000 barrels of oil sold through middlemen into Kurdistan and Turkey.¹⁵² In September 2014, experts estimated that The Islamic State could end 2014 with a surplus of \$100 - \$200 million.¹⁵³

The Islamic State has also made money from smuggling various raw materials stolen from government depots and, in line with its general disregard for the heritage and history of the region, is reported to have looted architectural sites and sold the antiquities it has found, or allowed others to do so in return for a cut. As reported by an Iraqi intelligence official, The Islamic State has taken \$36m from an area in the Qalamoun mountains west of Damascus where the antiquities are up to 8,000 years old.¹⁵⁴ This is more likely to have been the work of criminal gangs who knew what they were looking for and where to look, but nonetheless, The Islamic State will have taken a percentage wherever it could.¹⁵⁵

Although all figures for income and expenditure are unreliable, The Islamic State appears to have sufficiently diverse sources of income to survive the loss of one or another. Clearly the greatest loss would be its ability to sell oil products. Not only are these the largest source of income, but also oil sales put The Islamic State in touch with people who are most likely to meet any shortfall in its need for refined products. With a highly mobile fighting force dependent on a large fleet of vehicles, The Islamic State goes through a lot of fuel.

¹⁴⁹ https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Sinjar_2_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁵⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29004253>.

¹⁵¹ <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-funding-of-isis>.

¹⁵² <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/08/23-un-strikes-back-at-isis-black-economy>.

¹⁵³ <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/09/11/uk-iraq-crisis-militants-funding-insight-idUKKBN0H60AM20140911>.

¹⁵⁴ ISIS Cashing in on Looted Antiquities to Fuel Iraq Insurgency <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/06/140626-isis-insurgents-syria-iraq-looting-antiquities-archaeology/>.

¹⁵⁵ There was huge increase in the import of Syrian antiquities to the US in 2013. See <http://culturalheritagelawyer.blogspot.com/2014/10/conflict-and-heritage-trade-rise-in-us.html>.

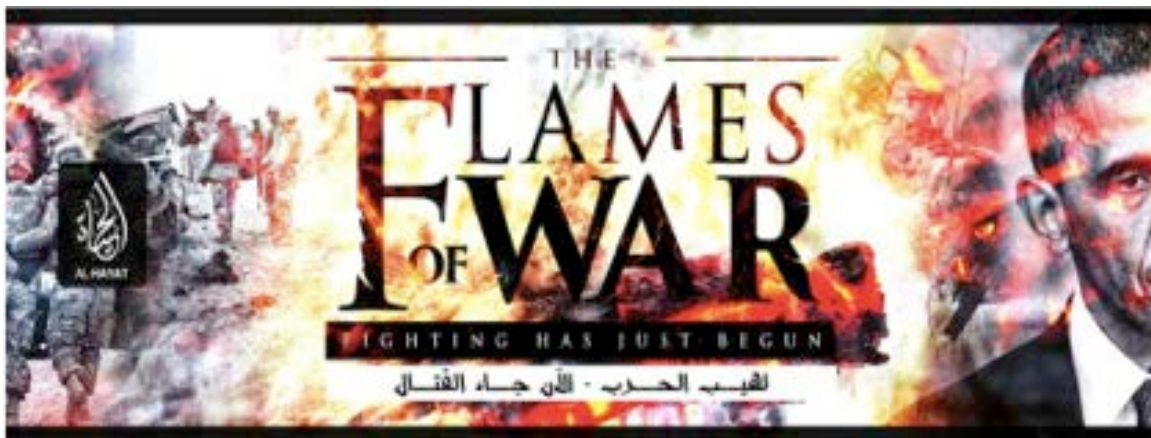
The official in charge of finances for the Iraqi provinces of The Islamic State is Abu Salah (Muafaq Mustafa Mohammed al Khamoush), who is believed to be from Morocco. His role, and that of his counterpart in Syria, is more than to keep The Islamic State solvent. The ability to raise taxes and operate an effective accounting system of income and expenditure are the trappings of a state,¹⁵⁶ and the meticulous record keeping and bureaucratic practices of The Islamic State, such as issuing receipts to truck drivers that they can show to the next check point, no doubt help it to project itself as far more than a criminal enterprise extorting arbitrary payments through local operators. Although there are restrictions on withdrawals, banks are operating within The Islamic State, and its internal economy appears to be functioning.

¹⁵⁶ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/taxanalysts/2014/08/18/how-isis-is-using-taxes-to-build-a-terrorist-state/>.

MEDIA OPERATIONS

The media effort of The Islamic State is an integral and essential part of its operations, on a par with its military and administrative effort.¹⁵⁷ In this respect it is greatly helped by the decentralized nature of social media (particularly Twitter), which has allowed each of its supporters effectively to create and operate his/her own ministry of information, echoing a standard party line as well as creating and spreading their own memes and messages. In effect, The Islamic State is crowd sourcing its propaganda. There is no precedent for this, given the novelty of social media platforms and file sharing sites, and so, in a counterintuitive move, The Islamic State has maximized control of its message by giving up control of its delivery.

The importance to The Islamic State of social media is evident in the way that pictures of Abu Bakr declaring the Caliphate on 4 July 2014 appeared on Twitter before the video of his full speech was uploaded on YouTube, helping to ensure that it would be carried on most major international news networks. Although occasionally its followers make mistakes and start sending links to products before the official launch time, for example with the video of the murder of Stephen Sotloff on 2 September 2014,¹⁵⁸ The Islamic State has a well disciplined and well organized media department.



For example, links to the violent hour-long video “Flames of War,” issued by The Islamic State on 16 September 2014 through its official outlet, al Hayat Media, were posted in several

¹⁵⁷ Follow ISIS on Twitter: A Special Report on the Use of Social Media by Jihadists <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/192-follow-isis-on-twitter>.

¹⁵⁸ <http://www.vocativ.com/world/iraq-world/isis-beheads-u-s-journalist-steven-sotloff/>.

places on the widely used file sharing site justpaste.it. These links were then tweeted out to tens of thousands of online supporters, who then re-tweeted the links, and, importantly, created new pages and links on justpaste.it. The video was also uploaded to YouTube on many accounts in order to overcome the inevitable suppression of the video for violating YouTube standards of use. Just one randomly selected page promoting the video among dozens of others, recorded 18,034 views within seven hours on 18 September 2014,¹⁵⁹ showing the ease, breadth, and speed with which The Islamic State is able to spread its message directly to the intended audience. The problems of censoring such a decentralized distribution system were well illustrated by the two days it took the mainstream social media to notice what was happening.

The overall media effort of The Islamic State is overseen by Abu Amr al Shami (Amr al Absi, Abu al Athir, Abu al Asir), a Syrian born in Saudi Arabia in 1979,¹⁶⁰ who was previously The Islamic State's leader in Aleppo and who also plays an important role in the Shura Council. Abu Amr controls an army of writers, bloggers and researchers who monitor global media, in particular social media. Most of these helpers are anonymous and they are widely spread, with many in the Gulf and North Africa. These bloggers tweet links of videos, generally with high production values, which are then further distributed. Abu Amr is also tasked with acting as the liaison for The Islamic State with religious leaders and influencers in the region.



Abu Mohammad al Adnani

¹⁵⁹ <https://justpaste.it/h5uk>.

¹⁶⁰ <http://www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/prgrmlst.txt>.

The spokesman of The Islamic State is Abu Mohammad al Adnani (Taha Sobhi Falaha), a Syrian who fought US forces in Iraq as a member of the Mujahideen Shura Council and was imprisoned from 2005 to 2010.¹⁶¹ Al Adnani was reported to be in charge of all operations in Syria at the start of 2013,¹⁶² and is believed to be a member of the Shura Council. But the notion of an official spokesman does not really apply to The Islamic State in the way it has applied to al Qaeda. The crowdsourcing of messages negates the need for a single point of contact. This might leave the group vulnerable to unofficial messages polluting its media stream but it is a small annoyance compared to the gains. Al Adnani is important, given his proximity to the Islamic State leadership and his knowledge of their goals, but in the absence of direct contact with media outlets - and little need for it - the role of spokesman is of limited importance.

The media department of The Islamic State is highly productive, churning out a wide range of media material that its supporters can use to attract potential recruits, raise money, promote the image of the organization, or just spread fear among its enemies. The production of extremely violent action films right before the military offensive in northern Iraq in June 2014, ‘Clanging of the Swords I-IV,’ is a good example of both the nature of the group’s propaganda and of the audience it hopes to attract. The naming of the movies and the use of Roman numerals suggesting that they form a series is straight out of Hollywood, as are the impressive techniques used, to include an opening sequence in the fourth installment that zooms in from a satellite image of Iraq and Syria to a drone flying over Fallujah.¹⁶³

As a result, references to the group by its supporters and others interested in its activities resulted in 4.1 million mentions of the English acronym ISIS between 17 September and 17 October 2014. The Arabic acronym (داعش) was mentioned 1.9 million times over the same period, with the group’s preferred name of “Islamic State” being tweeted a comparatively meager 880,651 times.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQI32514E.shtml>.

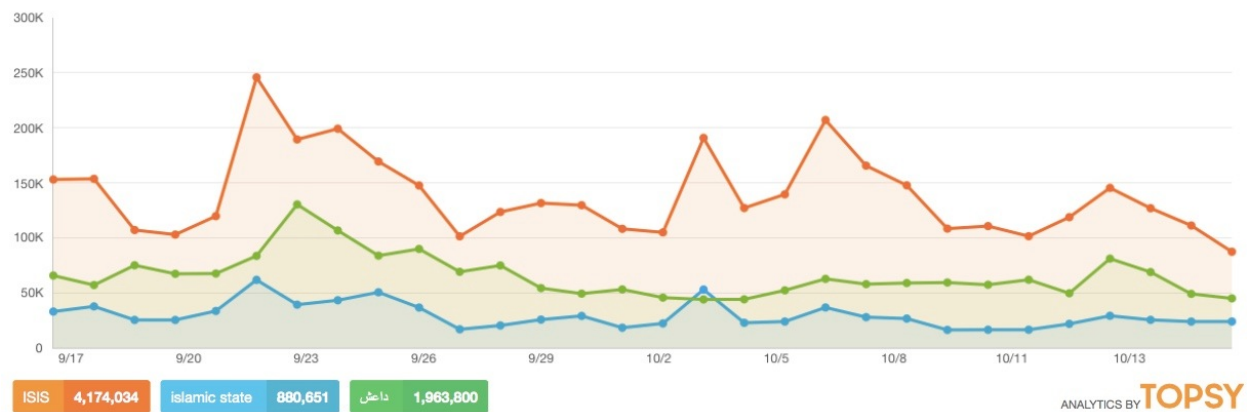
¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ ISIS jihadists put out Hollywood-style propaganda film <http://observers.france24.com/content/20140613-hollywood-fim-jihadist-propaganda-isis>.

¹⁶⁴ Although the group has gone to great lengths to suppress the use of the Arabic acronym (*daesh*) which it correctly regards as derogatory, and to rebrand itself as The Islamic State, so far as Twitter references are concerned, it has failed.

Tweets per day: ISIS, islamic state, and داعش

September 17th — October 17th



In order to combat the increased supervision of social media sites for offensive material, The Islamic State has gone still further in trying to ensure that its material is distributed as quickly and as widely as possible. For example, Palestinian affiliates have created a Twitter app called the 'The Dawn of Glad Tidings,' also just known as Dawn,¹⁶⁵ which collates a large amount of personal data from users and tweets various Islamic State content without triggering the spam detection function of Twitter.¹⁶⁶ Other less known social media platforms such as Quitter and Diaspora are increasingly used by The Islamic State to broadcast its messages as more popular platforms have become better at removing its material and blocking the accounts of Islamic State members.

On June 13, 2014 Twitter suspended the Al P'tisam page, which was the central information outlet of The Islamic State with more than 50,000 followers, but the decentralized nature of Twitter has helped mitigate this loss and the group's online presence has not suffered. Most of the influential Islamic State Twitter accounts have between 500 and 1,500 followers so the impact of their closure is limited and when an account is suspended, the user can simply open another and link it to the old one in a new tweet. Nonetheless, one supporter of The Islamic State was sufficiently incensed by the closure of accounts in September 2014 as to threaten lethal retaliation against Twitter employees.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Who is behind Isis's terrifying online propaganda operation? <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/23/who-behind-isis-propaganda-operation-iraq>.

¹⁶⁶ How ISIS games Twitter <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/>.

¹⁶⁷ <http://mashable.com/2014/09/08/twitter-isis/>.



@amustafaanbari4 Salam Alaikum brother, i just got suspended again, share my account

↩ Reply ↻ Retweet ★ Favorite ... More

The Islamic State also uses so-called ‘twitter bombs’ which redirect trending hashtags to Twitter material or websites related to The Islamic State.¹⁶⁸ They also use the most popular/trending hashtags along with their own hashtags as a way to piggyback onto popular trending conversations.¹⁶⁹ Most pages owned or related to The Islamic State tend to follow each other, so that the number of tweets and readings increases more rapidly.

The official media wing of the group is Al Furqan, which posts messages from the leadership, including videos of mass executions, and retweets material from the other Islamic State sites. One of its productions is a series of glorified accounts of recent Islamic State achievements, “Messages from the Land of Epic Battles.” Another outlet, Fursan al Balagh Media, now suspended, provided transcripts of Islamic State videos. There are other official pages, such as Ajna, which post religious citations, as well as the Al Hayat Media Center. Furthermore, each Islamic State province has its own media outlet, which focuses on local news.¹⁷⁰

In terms of targeting Western supporters, Al Hayat Media Centre is key. It acts as a multilingual recruitment channel and provides a large selection of media material, aiming to attract potential foreign recruits. One of its products is a very sophisticated HD propaganda video series known as the “Mujatweets,” which shows various aspects of daily life in The Islamic State, from fighting in Iraq and Syria, to testimonials from Western militants about their joy in joining The Islamic State. Al Hayat also provides English subtitles for videos put out by other Islamic State channels, such as Al P’tisam and Al Furqan. Aside from videos, The Islamic State releases a newspaper, called the ISN (Islamic State News), a six-page pdf with picture-based material and a brief propagandistic commentary in English about various

¹⁶⁸ Iraq crisis: ISIS social media blitz could be its downfall <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/iraq-crisis-isis-social-media-blitz-could-downfall-090000527.html>.

¹⁶⁹ For example: #Brazil2014, WorldCup2014. *See:* Beheading #WorldCup Shows Islamic State’s Online Savvy <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-07-07/beheading-worldcup-shows-islamic-state-s-online-savvy.html>.

¹⁷⁰ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/is-clinton-atrocities-social-media-baghdadi-mccain.html>.

day-to-day events.¹⁷¹ These media materials can be found on independent, free, web-hosting sites, and new issues are announced by the official Islamic State news channels.

In addition to the ISN, the ISR (Islamic State Report), also known as “An Insight Into The Islamic State,” contains articles about Islamic State events and agendas. On July 8, the group released its magazine, *Dabiq*, an extended version of the ISR, consisting of more detailed writings all in English. It resembles the well-known English-language magazine, *Inspire*, published by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and famous for providing basic instructions for terrorists; but its content is quite different.¹⁷² It is well produced and richly illustrated with a mixture of scenes of calm and of extreme violence. It is designed to attract recruits and contains lengthy exegeses of Islamic texts to justify its actions as well as encouragement for all sorts to make the journey to join the State. It does not shy away from portraying its worst excesses, such as the execution of hostages, the mass murder of prisoners and the enslavement of women, providing graphic photographs of the dead and of those about to die. It is unapologetic and self-congratulatory, explaining everything bad as the fault of someone else.



The name Dabiq itself refers to a place in Northern Syria where the Ottoman Empire had a decisive victory over the Egyptian Mamluk Empire, but the reference is to a hadith often quoted by Abu Musab al Zaqawi that predicts Dabiq as the place where Islam will win a great victory over the infidels, so leading to world domination and the end of times.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ New ISIS Media Company Addresses English, German and French-Speaking Westerners <http://www.memrijttm.org/new-isis-media-company-targets-english-german-and-french-speaking-westerners.html>.

¹⁷² Dabiq: the smiling face of Iraq-Syria ‘caliphate’ <http://news.yahoo.com/dabiq-smiling-face-iraq-syria-caliphate-081415767.html>.

¹⁷³ Dabiq: What Islamic State’s New Magazine Tells Us about Their Strategic Direction, Recruitment Patterns and Guerilla Doctrine http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42702&cHash=0efbd71af77fb92c064b9403dc8ea838#.U-JY7FYkhZg.

The Islamic State therefore shows a good understanding of both the importance and the use of media. It appeals to a wide range of audiences and designs both content and presentation accordingly, from violent action as in “The Flames of War” to a more intellectual appeal as in the “Lend Me Your Ears” propaganda series first trailed on 18 September 2014 by John Cantlie, a journalist held hostage by The Islamic State since November 2012. The Islamic State is also reactive, as in the campaign it launched on Twitter following the start of the US air campaign in August 2014 with the hashtag #AmessagefromISIS to US.¹⁷⁴ Needless to say, The Islamic State imposes such strict conditions on any independent journalist wishing to report from its territory as to make objective and uncensored reporting impossible.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ The Islamic State’s social media strategy <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/is-clinton-atrocities-social-media-baghdadi-mccain.html>.

¹⁷⁵ <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/10/6200/isis-issues-11-rules-journalists-deir-ezzor/>.

CONCLUSION

The Islamic State is an alarming phenomenon. It may wither and die as quickly as it has emerged, or it may prove to be the catalyst for major change within the region and beyond; in any case, it will take some time before its full impact is determined. However, in the meantime, the remarkable ability of a relatively weak and largely marginalized group of violent individuals, numbering in the hundreds, to establish themselves as a threat to international peace and security in command of an army of more than 30,000 fighters and controlling territory over a substantial area of two existing countries, is unprecedented in the modern age.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that it is not so much that The Islamic State is strong than that the governments of Iraq and Syria are weak, not necessarily in terms of their financial and military resources, but in their ability to govern. The Arab Spring, which had already led to the downfall of the governments of four countries before allowing The Islamic State to take root in Syria, is only part of the context for this accident of history. Beyond that is the exponential spread of social media and the empowerment and connectivity that it has provided to people whose lives might otherwise have remained circumscribed by the traditions of their families and the practices of their communities. This has been equally as true in the West as it has been in the Arab world, and it is increasingly true elsewhere as well. It is a trend that will not reverse and so inevitably will lead to new concepts of normality.

This is where The Islamic State faces its biggest challenge. It is all about the past without much realistic vision for the future. It will be no more able to harness the social, economic, and political forces around it than were the states that, through their failure, allowed the space for The Islamic State to grow. The thirst for change that The Islamic State has managed to exploit will not be slaked by its totalitarian approach towards its subjects. In today's world, no state, however remote, can hope to control its population by limiting its access to information or suppressing its ability to think.

The question remains therefore as to how much damage The Islamic State will be able to inflict before it dies away. Military action will limit its physical reach but will not destroy its appeal, either in Iraq and Syria or further afield, unless there is something available to take its place. There is no going back to how things were. The dynamics of the Middle East, and its social and political development, will all look quite different by the time The Islamic State disappears, and it is up to the regional powers, helped by the international community, to ensure that what comes afterwards harnesses the energy of dissent in a more positive direction.

CONTRIBUTORS

Richard Barrett

Senior Vice President

Richard Barrett, Senior Vice President, is a former British diplomat and intelligence officer who from March 2004 to January 2013 headed the United Nations Monitoring Team concerning Al-Qaida and the Taliban. He is a recognized expert on violent extremism and the measures that can be taken against it.

Patrick M. Skinner

Director of Special Projects

Patrick M. Skinner is the Director of Special Projects for The Soufan Group. He is a former CIA Case Officer, with extensive experience in source handling and source networks, specializing in counter-terrorism issues. In addition to his intelligence experience, he has law enforcement experience with the US Air Marshals and the US Capitol Police, as well as search and rescue experience in the US Coast Guard.

Robert McFadden

Senior Vice President

Robert. McFadden is a 30-year veteran of the U.S. federal law enforcement, intelligence, and counterintelligence communities and has held several high-profile leadership positions, including Deputy Assistant Director, Counterintelligence Operations, NCIS.

Lila Ghosh

Director of Communications

Lila Ghosh is the Director of Communications at The Soufan Group, focusing on communications and policy. She has experience in international media, foreign policy, and international security, having worked at Condé Nast International, The Council on Foreign Relations, CNN, and a private security contractor.

THE SOUFAN GROUP

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THE SOUFAN GROUP
156 WEST 56TH STREET | SUITE 1702
NEW YORK | NEW YORK 10019
WWW.SOUFANGROUP.COM