

# THE ISLAMIC STATE: FROM AL-QAEDA AFFILIATE TO CALIPHATE

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**T**he dramatic victories in summer 2014 of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) over rival groups fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad — and over the government of Iraq and Kurdish forces — culminated in the declaration of a caliphate, or the Islamic State. The international community became alarmed, and the lightning ISIS advance in Iraq was blunted in mid-August by U.S. air power. Air strikes were ramped up in September and October in both Iraq and Syria by the United States and an *ad hoc* coalition of Middle Eastern and European states.

There has been a scramble by policy makers, militaries, intelligence officials and journalists from around the globe to understand the ISIS phenomenon, resulting in a profusion of unverified and contradictory information.\* This study, drawing from a multitude of open sources, seeks to provide a concise overview of the origins, ideology, goals and military operations of ISIS in Iraq and Syria from 2003 to the

present in order to help governments understand and deal with this phenomenon.

## THE ORIGINS OF ISIS/IS

ISIS/IS has its origins in an obscure militant group, Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJ), that was stood up in 2000 by a Jordanian one-time criminal-turned-Islamist named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (AMZ).<sup>1</sup> His intent was to fight the Jordanian government, but he failed to gain traction.<sup>2</sup> Zarqawi then traveled to Afghanistan to fight on the side of the *mujahidin* (resistance) in the jihad against the Soviets. Having arrived after their departure, he soon returned to his homeland to fight the well-entrenched Jordanian monarchy. His efforts came to naught, and he eventually returned to Afghanistan, where he ran an Islamic militant training camp near Herat. No evidence exists that he had much interaction with Osama bin Laden or his organization, al-Qaeda. AMZ claimed he was influenced by Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian Jordanian Islamist thinker

\* The group will be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) until its transformation into the Islamic State (IS) in June 2014. The predecessors of ISIS will be known by their own names at the time of existence. For more details on the nomenclature debate, see Zack Beauchamp, "ISIS, Islamic State or ISIL? What to call the group the U.S. is bombing in Iraq," *OSINT Journal Review*, September 17, 2014.

who exhorted Arabs to fight the Soviets alongside the Afghan mujahidin: “We used to receive some audiocassettes recorded by Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, may he rest in peace. He had a great influence on my decision to engage in jihad.”<sup>3</sup>

Following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi moved into Iraq. There he developed extensive ties with Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam), a Kurdish Islamist group. In March 2003, the United States invaded and occupied Iraq. A brilliant conventional campaign led to the erroneous belief on the part of the George W. Bush administration that Iraq would stabilize and progress towards democracy. By summer 2003, the disgruntled Sunni minority — toppled from power with the downfall of Saddam Hussein — launched a deadly insurgency. It consisted of five distinct groups, four composed largely of Iraqis from the former regime, nationalists, tribal elements and various Islamist fighters. The fifth group was AMZ’s JTJ, consisting of a smattering of Iraqis and many foreign fighters.

JTJ developed into a network aimed at resisting the coalition occupation forces and their Iraqi allies. Its goals: to (i) force a withdrawal of coalition forces from Iraq; (ii) topple the Iraqi interim government; (iii) assassinate collaborators with the occupation regime; (iv) target the Shia population and defeat its deadly militias; and (v) establish an Islamic state under *sharia*, God’s law. AMZ declared that the JTJ political platform was based on a saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammed: “I was sent to the world with a sword in my hand until all worship would be devoted to Allah alone.”<sup>4</sup> AMZ elaborates his project:

We will fight in the cause of God until His shariah prevails. The first step

is to expel the enemy and establish the state of Islam. We would then go forth to reconquer the Muslim lands and restore them to the Muslim nation.... I swear by God that even if the Americans had not invaded our lands together with the Jews, the Muslims would still be required *not* to refrain from jihad but go forth and seek the enemy until only God Almighty’s shariah prevailed everywhere in the world.... Our political project is to expel this marauding enemy. This is the first step. Afterwards our goal is to establish God’s shariah all over the globe.... We will not be revealing a secret when we say that we seek to establish Islamic justice in the entire world and crush the injustice of disbelief and the iniquity of other religions.<sup>5</sup>

In pursuit of his goals, AMZ left a trail of death and destruction in Iraq. JTJ differed considerably from the other Iraqi insurgent groups. Rather than using only guerrilla tactics — ambushes, raids and hit-and-run attacks against the U.S. forces — it relied heavily on suicide bombers. It targeted a wide variety of groups: the Iraqi security forces, Iraqi Shia and Kurdish political and religious figures, Shia Muslim civilians, foreign civilian contractors, and UN and humanitarian workers. AMZ reserved much of his ire for the Shia of Iraq. In February 2004, AMZ had called the Shia the “insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom.” AMZ was very adept at using the Internet to promote his message, recruit personnel and terrorize his enemies, posting his first communiqué on a jihadist website in April 2004. Through creating a worldwide network, Zarqawi’s volunteers posted messages from their leader and

videos of militant acts, like beheadings, on multiple servers. This avoided delays in downloading and made it difficult for the material to be removed from the World Wide Web.

### AMZ JOINS AL-QAEDA

In late 2004, AMZ brought his group under the loose control of Osama bin Laden; the group officially pledged allegiance to the al-Qaeda network in a letter in October 2004. The new organization, Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, or al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), provided al-Qaeda with a ready-made base from which to strike the United States and AMZ with prestige. He was now part of a brand name that drew recruits and financial and logistical support.

In March 2005, AQI articulated a cohesive ideological vision — its “creed and methodology” — in which it expressed its determination to promote and defend *tawhid* (monotheism) and eliminate polytheism. It defined anyone who did not believe in the essential unity/oneness of God as an infidel and subject to *takfir* (excommunication) and death. It expressed the belief that the Prophet Mohammad is God’s messenger for the entire human race and viewed secularism (*ilmaniyah*) and all other isms — nationalism, tribalism, communism and Baathism — as “blatant violations of Islam.” Jihad was the duty of all Muslims if the infidels attacked. Waging jihad against the enemies of Islam was next in importance to the profession of the *shahada* (faith). AQI argued that all Muslims — excluding the Shia — constitute one nation. There is no differentiation between Arabs and non-Arabs; piety is what counts.

In the words of Abu Maysara al-Iraqi, then the chief spokesman of AQI, the goals are explicit:

- Remove the “aggressor” from Iraq.
- Affirm *tawhid*, oneness of God among Muslims.
- Propagate the message that “there is no god but God” to all the countries in which Islam is absent.
- Wage jihad to liberate Muslim territories from infidels and apostates.
- Fight the *taghut* (illegitimate) rulers of Muslim lands.
- “Establish a wise caliphate” in which the sharia rules supreme, as it did during the time of the Prophet Mohammad.
- “Spread monotheism on earth, cleanse it of polytheism, to govern according to the laws of God...”<sup>6</sup>

AMZ and al-Qaeda Central (AQC), the top leadership, saw eye to eye on ideology and goals, but problems arose over AQI’s *modus operandi* in Iraq. AMZ’s tactic of engaging in mass civilian casualties, earning him the sobriquet “sheikh of the slaughterers,” aroused grave concern from his mentor Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, a leading Salafist thinker based in Jordan, and among al-Qaeda leaders, including second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri. In July 2005, differences of opinion between Al-Maqdisi and AMZ came out into the open. In his “Message of Support and Advice,” published on his website *Minbar al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad*, Maqdisi advised AMZ to stop targeting civilians, churches and Shia. The real enemy, added Maqdisi, was the American occupier. AMZ responded that the advice was unfair; he viewed the Shia as rejectionists and apostates and considered fighting them to be more important than fighting non-Muslims.<sup>7</sup> AMZ blamed the Shia for the vicious sectarian conflict:

We did not initiate fighting with them, nor did we point our slings at them. It

was they who started liquidating the cadres of the Sunni people, rendering them homeless, and usurping their mosques and houses.<sup>8</sup>

Ayman al-Zawahiri apparently sent a letter to AMZ on July 9, 2005, that was intercepted by U.S. military forces. In the letter, Zawahiri expresses total agreement with the goals of the jihadist military efforts in Iraq but expresses grave reservations with AMZ's tactics. The jihadists cannot win without the hearts and minds of the (Sunni) Muslim masses and the *ulema* (scholars). More locals — Iraqis — need to be the face of AQI. The Taliban in Afghanistan lacked popular support; hence they succumbed. Zawahiri adds that the Shia are truly treacherous and cannot be trusted but questions whether it is necessary to slaughter them in such a manner. It alienates Muslim opinion and distracts the jihadists from fighting the Americans; the conflict with the Shia can wait. Finally, is it really necessary, asks Zawahiri, to engage in public displays of brutality such as the beheadings of hostages? This was not good public relations.

### THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ISI

It is not clear what impact AQC's expression of concern had, but in January 2006, AQI created an umbrella organization called the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC) in an attempt to unify Sunni insurgents in Iraq. Its efforts to recruit Iraqi Sunni nationalists and secular groups were undermined by its violent tactics against civilians. When the U.S. military killed Zarqawi on June 7, 2006, a top AQ operative, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (aka Abu Ayub al-Masri), was promoted to be the AQI representative in Iraq. Soon afterward, the organization announced the establishment

of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. Abu Hamza al-Muhajir stated that the mujahidin have "reached the end of a stage of jihad and the start of a new one, in which we lay the first cornerstone of the Islamic Caliphate project and revive the glory of religion."<sup>9</sup> The creation of the first Islamic state was supported by some obscure jihadist thinkers. However, it set off a storm of criticism among Iraqi insurgent groups, who considered the project a deviation from the main task of fighting the American occupiers. Most of the groups made it clear that they were interested in liberating Iraq and not in creating an Islamic state.

The first Islamic-state project was a failure. The jihadists simply did not have the resources or personnel to rule over a territory and people. Furthermore, the death of AMZ did not lessen the jihadists' reign of terror, accelerating the loss of support from the Sunni tribes and Iraqi insurgents. This was made worse by its attempts to muscle in on Sunni economic enterprises, and its propensity to insult Sunni tribal mores and customs accelerated. The falling out led to the emergence of the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement. The tribes and Sunni insurgents allied with their erstwhile enemy, the United States, to fight ISI, in return for integration of the Sunni fighters into the Iraqi security services and for economic largesse to majority-Sunni areas. The weight of force directed against them proved too much for ISI. In 2008, it was describing itself as being in a state of "extraordinary crisis."

By the end of 2008, ISI was apparently defeated, and Iraq was on the path to stability and security. In early 2009, U.S. forces began pulling out of cities across the country, turning over the task of maintaining security to the vastly enlarged and

American-trained Iraqi Security Forces. Later that year, to the consternation of the U.S. and Iraqi governments, ISI rebounded and appeared to be launching a concerted effort to cripple the Iraqi government. During August and October 2009, ISI began to sabotage government infrastructure and launch terror attacks against civilians, killing hundreds.

Nonetheless, ISI suffered a significant blow on April 18, 2010, when its top leadership, Abu Ayub al-Masri and Abu Umar Abdullah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi, were both killed in a joint U.S.-Iraqi raid near Tikrit. By June 2010, 80 percent of the group's 42 leaders, including recruiters and financiers, had been killed or captured, with only eight remaining at large. The decapitation of the leadership in 2010 set the stage for the emergence of the current and most successful leader, Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai (aka Dr. Ibrahim, Abu Dua, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). It is difficult to pin down exactly who this elusive character is. It is said he is descended from the Prophet Muhammad and that he hails from the al-Bu Badri tribe, which is primarily based in Samarra and Diyala. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi helped create Jaysh Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jamah (the Army of the Sunni People), an active jihadist group that operated in Samarra, Diyala and Baghdad. U.S. forces arrested Abu Bakr in February 2004 and released him in December that year because he was not deemed to be a High Value Target. The Jaysh Ahl al-Sunnah leadership pledged allegiance to AQI and joined the umbrella organization.<sup>10</sup>

### ISI REEMERGES

Between 2010 and 2013, four key factors contributed to the reemergence of ISI: organizational restructuring coupled with

the rebuilding of its military and administrative capacities; the dysfunctional nature of the Iraqi state and its growing conflict with the Sunni population; the fading away of al-Qaeda under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri; and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.

ISI goals became more nuanced and concisely articulated by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the overthrow of illegitimate governments and the creation of an Islamic caliphate. This came out clearly once al-Baghdadi transformed his organization into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and subsequently into the Islamic State. The focus on the caliphate has been elaborated in detail in the Islamic State's glossy magazine, *Dabiq*, of which there have been four issues to date. The first dealt with the importance of the declaration of the caliphate, among other matters. The caliphate represents the onset of a new era of "might and dignity" for the Muslims. The focus on creating an Islamic state is the defining element for ISIS, even if it was unable to gain the acclaim of the Islamic world and even if the state proves short-lived. It differs from al-Qaeda in its superior abilities to articulate an effective vision and a military strategy for implementing it. Even if ISIS fails, and there is every indication of impending overreach, this vision is remarkable for its audacity.

Having an ideology and goals of breathtaking ambition is not sufficient. ISI was a moribund mess when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over; his revival of the organization began in 2010 and culminated in the organizational structure we see today. Much of the success of ISIS is due to the creation of a cohesive, disciplined and flexible organization by al-Baghdadi and other Iraqis that he hired, including, it is alleged, a former senior Iraqi army



officer known as “Hajji Bakr.” First, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi began by learning from and avoiding the mistakes of AMZ, such as spectacular and provocative attacks. AMZ’s successor, Abu-Umar al-Baghdadi, erred by focusing on the mind-numbing minutiae of the organization and micro-managing his subordinates. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi built a hierarchical and centralized organization that was flexible enough to allow subordinates wide latitude in the field, as long as they stayed within the mission guidelines established by the leader.

Second, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi reduced the role of the Arab expatriates in leadership posts. The presence of foreign Arabs at the top had irritated potential Iraqi supporters in the past. Instead they are now in combat units, like most of the non-Arab foreign fighters, and in support roles such as media outreach and propaganda, recruitment and collection of donations. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi thus allowed Iraqis, mostly from the military and security establishments of the former Baathist regime, to fill in the top layers of ISIS and then of the Islamic State.

Third, he divided the organization into the leadership — *al-imara* — or the executive, composed of Abu Bakr and his top advisers and second in command. It is the policymaking and governing body of the Islamic State. The rest of the organization is divided into first- and second-echelon structures.<sup>11</sup> The first echelon consists of the Shura Council, the Military Council, and the Security and Intelligence Council. Abu Bakr directly supervises these councils. The Shura Council comes immediately below the leadership in importance; it consists of Abu Bakr himself and the “cabinet,” nine to 11 members who can theoretically dismiss the leader if he does not carry out his duties as ordained by his office.

The Military Council consists of a head, chosen by al-Baghdadi, and three members. It oversees the military commanders in the *wilayats* (provinces) that make up the various units of the Islamic State. Careful observation of data suggests that the military contingents are distinct and made up of Iraqis directly in IS battalions, associated local fighters from the former regime elements, and foreign fighters mainly from Arab countries (the Westerners, including those of Middle Eastern descent, are in IS units in Ar-Raqqa, Syria). An exception is the fearsome and combat-effective Chechen fighters who, allegedly, played a key role in routing the Iraqi army in Mosul.

Intelligence and military personnel from Saddam Hussein’s army and security services helped set up and run the Security and Intelligence Council (SIC). It has a wide range of duties: (a) providing protective security to Al-Baghdadi for his movements and engagements; (b) ensuring the maintenance of communications between al-Baghdadi and the “provincial governors,” who implement the caliph’s decisions; (c) overseeing the execution of court rulings and the execution of penalties; (d) providing counterintelligence to prevent enemy infiltration of the state; (e) overseeing the delivery of mail and the security of communications among the various IS branches; and (f) maintaining special detachments for conducting assassinations, kidnappings and the collection of funds (headed by former members of the Baathist security services such as a former officer known as Abu Safwan al-Rifai.)

Of the second-echelon structure the most important deals with the finances of ISIS and the Islamic State, especially pertaining to the funding of the war machine and the running costs of its state-building

process. Our knowledge of the finances of ISIS/IS is still a work in progress; there are many unverified statements about the sources of its finances that continue to be issued uncritically by governments and the media. In brief, the Islamic State gets its money from the export of oil from fields under its control; it exports the oil to the Syrian government and the Iraqi Kurdish region and to Turkish groups. It taxes the population under its control and engages in the time-honored tactic of “extortion” from businesses.

### ISI Grand Strategy

The resilient and flexible organization that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi built enabled him to formulate and implement a grand strategy in which goals are matched to operational plans for achieving them. This grand strategy is based on lessons learned from the failures of its parent organization, al-Qaeda, and from two key works: *Idarat al-tawwahun: Akhtar marhala satamur biha al-umma* (The Management of Savagery: The Most Dangerous Period Through Which the Umma Is Passing), written in 2009 by Abu Bakr Naji (aka Muhammad Abu Khalil al-Hakaymah), and *Khouta istrategiyah li taziz al-mawqif al-siyasi lil dawlah al-islamiyah fi al-Iraq* (Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State in Iraq), written in 2010 by members of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

*Management of Savagery* argues that carrying out a campaign of constant violent attacks in Muslim states will eventually exhaust these states’ ability and will to enforce their authority and that, as the writ of the state withers away, chaos or savagery (*tawahhush*) will ensue. Of course, if the state is facing serious internal and external difficulties such as civil war, revolution or

attack from outside, the jihadists can take advantage of such situations to weaken the illegitimate regime even more by attenuating its control over its territories. Jihadists can take advantage of this savagery to win popular support, or at least acquiescence, by imposing security, providing social services and implementing sharia. As these territories under control increase, they can become the nucleus of a new caliphate.

ISI believed that Iraq could be returned to and maintained in a state of savagery, despite the success of the Americans and their Iraqi allies in crushing the group in 2007-08. It is in this context that *Strategic Plan* was written. It called for taking measures to improve the political and military positions of ISI so that it would be ready to capture and control territory once the Americans left. It would then be in position to create the caliphate. Operationally, the Strategic Plan calls on ISI to coordinate its political and military efforts, execute an effective PSYOPS campaign against the Iraqi security forces, and implement a jihadist equivalent of the “awakening” campaign.<sup>12</sup>

ISI’s military revival was on full display even before the events of 2014, and its attacks were characterized by their sheer ferocity, frequency and lethality. Abu Bakr was responsible for managing and directing large-scale operations. Between March and April 2011, ISI claimed 23 attacks south of Baghdad. On May 5, 2011, al-Baghdadi claimed responsibility for an attack in Hilla that killed 24 policemen and wounded 72 others. On August 15, 2011, a wave of ISI attacks beginning in Mosul resulted in 70 deaths. On December 22, 2011, a series of coordinated car bombings and IED attacks struck over a dozen neighborhoods across Baghdad, killing at least 63 people and wounding 180. The litany of death and destruction continued into 2012.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced a campaign of “Breaking the Walls” in July 2012 that made freeing its members from prison a top priority. The freed prisoners provided the organization with effective combat and administrative leaders. This was followed by the July 2013 campaign entitled “Soldier’s Harvest,” which targeted members of the Iraqi security forces. By the end of 2012, ISI had developed a solid military cadre capable of waging a sustained terror campaign, conducting raids on government forces and launching well-planned attacks on government infrastructure.

### THE SUNNI-SHIA RIFT

The growing dysfunction of the Iraqi state — reflected in, among other things, the growing chasm between the government of Nuri al-Maliki and the Sunni provinces of Salahuddin, al-Anbar and Diyala — enabled ISI to reenter the battle from which it had been ejected in 2008. From 2009 onwards, the western Sunni provinces witnessed large-scale, well-organized and well-managed demonstrations for an improved standard of living, including better job opportunities. Maliki instituted a policy of marginalizing the Sunnis politically. He went after Sunni politicians, seeking to eliminate them from the political process and from the military and security services. A feeling of marginalization drove many Sunnis back to the organization they had fought so fiercely during the “awakening.”

### Al-Qaeda Eclipsed?

For the past four years, the fortunes of al-Qaeda have been the source of considerable analysis. Some observers have argued that al-Qaeda is still effective and doing well as a terrorist organization because of its adaptability. Others have argued that,

with the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, al-Qaeda has been in irretrievable decline. His successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has been unable to control the affiliates associated with the al-Qaeda brand name. Indeed, he has been accused of allowing too many groups to come in under the umbrella of the organization. This chaotic situation has caused problems for AQC.

AQC, which is made up of the leadership, does not have any military capacity; its sustainability lies in the successes of its franchises and affiliates. However, these subgroups may not feel the need to necessarily toe the line, particularly if AQC has not contributed in any way to the local successes of these groups. AQC simply does not know the conditions on the ground in many of these places, and Al-Zawahiri cannot control the affiliates or franchises as if the organization were a hierarchical entity with him in direct command. Naturally, the subgroups will do what is in their interests. On the other hand, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which operates in Yemen, has always had closer links with AQC because its leadership has interacted with and knows the top echelon of al-Qaeda. This cannot be said of the former affiliate in Iraq going back to Zarqawi; it has always been a black sheep of the jihadist family.

Finally, there seems to be a clear generational gap between the older veterans of AQC and the more “toxic” younger generation being attracted to the likes of the Islamic State. Though it is difficult to gather social data accurately under present circumstances, ISIS and its successor (IS) have attracted a wide range of people from all economic strata and have done particularly well among a younger group ranging from the self-radicalized to the committed to those seeking adventure and for whom



al-Qaeda no longer resonates. 9/11 happened a decade ago, while ISIS has gone from success to success.<sup>13</sup>

### The Rise of ISIS

The second chapter of ISI's evolution begins in March 2011 with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the transformation of the group into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), when its leadership decided to join the war against the Assad regime. This was a logical move for al-Baghdadi. According to his view, the secular Assad regime, dominated by the heterodox Alawite sect that most in the Islamic world do not view as Muslim, was trying to crush Muslims. Furthermore, Syria was a serious battle space in which ISI fighters could hone their skills and learn small-unit tactics fighting against a real army.

The Syrian battle space was politically complex. On one side stood the Syrian regime and its internal and external supporters; on the other, myriad opponents ranging from secular nationalists to liberal democrats to various Islamists, including jihadists. Al-Baghdadi sent into Syria a number of operatives — mostly Syrian veterans of the Iraqi insurgency against the United States — to prepare for the entry of ISI. A group of these veterans emerged as Jabhat al-Nusra in 2012 under the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani (Jawlani in Arabic signifies that he hailed from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights). Al-Nusra did well against the forces of the Syrian regime. It increased its popularity in war-torn Aleppo by establishing an efficient and well-disciplined structure for the distribution of food and medicine. This stood in marked contrast to the undisciplined and brutal behavior of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) opponents of the Assad regime. ISI's leadership noticed

this. In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released an audio statement announcing that Al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) had been established, financed and supported by the Islamic State of Iraq. Al-Baghdadi declared that the two groups were merging as the "Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham." The leader of Al-Nusra Front, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, issued a statement denying the merger and complaining that neither he nor anyone else in Al-Nusra's leadership had been consulted about it.

There are significant differences between Al-Nusra and ISIS. Al-Nusra was willing to cooperate with other jihadist groups to promote the goal of an Islamic state in Syria; ISIS was not so pragmatic. While Al-Nusra has a large contingent of foreign fighters, many Syrians see it as Syrian; by contrast, ISIS personnel are described as "foreign" occupiers. Al-Nusra actively fought for the overthrow of the Assad government; ISIS was more focused on establishing its own rule over territory and people and avoided fighting the Syrian Army. ISIS was far more ruthless in building an Islamic state; setting up a proto-state in the Syrian city of Raqqa in the northeast, where it built "a holistic system of governance that includes religious, educational, judicial, security, humanitarian and infrastructure projects..."<sup>14</sup>

In June 2013, Ayman al-Zawahiri, addressed both leaders in a letter, ruling against the merger and appointing an emissary to oversee relations between them and put an end to tensions. Zawahiri stipulated that al-Nusra would fight in Syria and ISI in Iraq. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released an audio message rejecting Zawahiri's ruling and declaring that the merger would go ahead. In October 2013, Zawahiri ordered the disbanding of ISIS, putting Al-Nusra Front in charge of jihadist efforts in Syria.

Baghdadi and others within ISIS contested Zawahiri's ruling on the basis of Islamic jurisprudence and practical and logical grounds. It would be a sin to dissolve the union. Furthermore, Islam did not recognize the "artificial" Sykes-Picot boundaries created in the aftermath of World War I that had divided the Islamic *umma* into states. Finally, it made no sense for the jihadists to fight disunited. In February 2014, after an eight-month power struggle, al-Qaeda disavowed relations with ISIS. In May 2014, Zawahiri ordered Al-Nusra Front to stop attacking ISIS, but there was no reconciliation.

### Shock and Awe

When ISIS returned to Iraq in June 2014 to seize large swaths of territory, the stage was already set for an insurgent version of "shock and awe." ISIS concentrated its forces for a lightning attack on the Iraqis and the capture of territory and cities. ISIS activated the operational links with many former Baathist insurgents, many of whom were officers and intelligence personnel in the regime of Saddam Hussein. This included groups such as Rijal Jaysh al-Naqshbandiya and others that had ensconced themselves in Mosul and ran a shadow administration. ISIS information operations conducted by Shura Council leaders convinced several military and local leaders to resign and flee their posts, eventually giving rise to "stab in the back" stories of betrayal. Remaining military units and civilian leaders were isolated and targeted by suicide bombers or assassination squads or murdered en masse when captured, to send a message to remaining government forces. Videos of massacres were distributed widely, reaching the remaining Iraqi troops on the front lines. Many Sunnis, in particular, had no

reason to fight for the Maliki government and deserted in large numbers. The statement of one Sunni security officer speaks volumes:

They [the Shia] don't even consider us Sunnis to be human beings. Only Shiites got promoted to become officers, and it was only the Shiites who landed government contracts. We were second-class citizens. Maliki asked Assad to bomb us Iraqis because he didn't have any aircraft of his own [Syrian Air Force fighters bombed ISIS positions in Iraq]. What kind of a leader is that?<sup>15</sup>

Upon seizing a city, ISIS personnel made straight for police and municipal buildings and core infrastructure such as water and electricity, enabling them to completely control access to vital needs.

The Iraqi security forces collapsed. Four army divisions simply disappeared and will not be easily rebuilt. The Second Division was routed from Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, on June 9, and its four brigades dissolved. The First Division lost two brigades in Anbar earlier in the year, then two more during the ISIS advance in June, with one brigade totally destroyed in Diyala just northeast of Baghdad. The same is true of Iraq's Third Division. The division's Sixth and Ninth Brigades fled the Islamic State's advance in the north, and the Eleventh largely vanished. The Fourth Division also was routed. Half its personnel vanished; most deserted, while hundreds may have been massacred. Iraqi troops on the front line were short of food, water and ammunition. They survived because the ulema and charities in Samarra provided food for them. ISIS captured an enormous amount of equipment, including 1,500 armored Humvees and large num-

bers of mortars and heavy artillery pieces, among them 52 GPS-guided 155mm M198 howitzers.<sup>16</sup>

The size of the June 2014 debacle became clear shortly thereafter. American advisers turning up to assess the situation and help rebuild the Iraqi security forces found an incompetent military deeply infiltrated by Sunni militants and Shia militiamen, led by an unprofessional officer corps incapable of meeting the logistics needs of its soldiers. The initial U.S. assessment, which arrived at the Pentagon on July 14, was grim. The advisers concluded that Iraqi forces would be unable to launch the kinds of offensive operations required to roll back ISIS.

## THE CALIPHATE

The successes of ISIS on the ground in Syria and Iraq led it to view the situation as opportune for the establishment of an Islamic state. On June 29, 2014, ISIS began to refer to itself as the Islamic State, declaring its occupied territory a new caliphate and naming Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its ruler (caliph). Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, spokesperson for ISIS, described the establishment of the caliphate as “a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim believer” and “the neglected obligation of the era.” He said that the group’s ruling Shura Council had decided to establish the caliphate formally and that Muslims around the world should now pledge their allegiance to the new caliph.

The declaration of the caliphate resounded throughout the region and the Islamic world. On the ground, there was an increase in surrenders by rebel brigades in Syria’s Deir ez-Zour province. Fearful of ISIS power in the wake of its successes, a number of local leaders and tribal elders in Syria and Iraq sought to avoid confron-

tation and agreed to peaceful surrenders of their militias and occupations of their towns and villages. These surrenders and accretions of territory provided the Islamic State with territorial contiguity between the lands it seized in Syria and in Iraq, allowing it to claim that it had erased the old colonial boundaries established by the Western powers after World War I.

Second, the declaration of the caliphate created a stir in Islamist circles, not least within AQC, which was taken aback by being upstaged. The event divided jihadist thinkers and religious personalities as well as jihadist movements. AQC and its supporters — who tended to be older and veterans of past jihads — argued that Baghdadi was an upstart who had no right to declare a caliphate; the time was inopportune and the manner inappropriate. Al-Baghdadi and his supporters — frustrated by al-Qaeda’s seeming lack of vigor and success in recent years — declared that the military successes of ISIS provided both the legitimacy and opportunity to declare a caliphate.

The resurgence of ISIS and its subsequent transformation into the Islamic State has come as a shock to the Iraqi government, the region and the international community. The key question is whether the group can reinforce its hold on the area it controls, or whether it will face factional challenges or effective international push-back. The challenges are both internal and external.

## Imploding from Within

IS may sabotage itself without any help from the outside. It may overreach, even though its leaders have cautioned its commanders on the ground to be prudent as they extended control over territory and peoples. The first Islamic state experiment

revealed that the jihadists were not very effective at establishing and maintaining local alliances. It succumbed to hubris before it could consolidate control and began acting as if it were the dominant group, opening the door to an anti-jihadist uprising among Sunni insurgents that was aided by the Americans.

The Islamic State of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has pursued two pathways to the construction of the state, depending on circumstances and local conditions. It used violence against groups in Syria and moved swiftly to control territory and population. In northern Iraq, especially around Mosul, it sought to build and sustain alliances with local armed groups and slowly inserted itself within the population. This required compromise and prudence in dealing with the heavily armed and well-embedded former Sunni insurgents, including Baathist and Islamist groups that had established shadow financial networks. The Maliki government's unwillingness to meet Sunni demands for greater political inclusion and more resources made ISIS's job of "seducing" the Sunni fighters an easy task. Maliki's replacement, Haider al-Abadi, is seen as equally anti-Sunni. Furthermore, so many Sunni groups have gone so far to the other side that neither sees any hope of reconciliation. The longer the Islamic State can take advantage of this lack of Sunni options, the more likely it is to transform itself into a socially embedded political, economic and military presence in the Sunni areas of Iraq. Key Sunni leaders of the Sahwa movement who refused to see the merits of allying with ISIS have either been assassinated or forced to "repent" in order to join the organization.<sup>17</sup>

The ideology of IS and its horrific modus operandi may engender resistance;

conflict with its local partners is the most likely pathway to collapse in both Syria and Iraq. Moreover, strife with its allies over resources and power sharing may emerge. Dependence on local Sunni networks made IS vulnerable to abandonment by the groups that formed the Anbar Awakening. Resistance has emerged in a number of areas in Syria. Groups affiliated with the main Syrian opposition group, the FSA, issued statements rejecting IS and declaring their commitment to continue the struggle against it. In Iraq, there are already strains between some of the former Baathist and nationalist elements, who see IS and its leaders as "useful idiots" who can be used to exact revenge and overturn the Shia-dominated system in Baghdad. However, there is every indication that IS and its command see the local allies as the useful idiots to be exploited. Only time will tell whether IS will succeed in fully incorporating the "allies."

### **Destroying IS from the Outside**

The international community has deferred to the United States in the effort to thwart the IS, but President Obama's six-point plan for the defeat of the Islamic State promises more than it can likely deliver. On September 10, 2014, Obama laid out his strategy for significant expansion of the aerial bombing campaign in Iraq. Since mid-August, airpower has blunted the forward momentum of the lightning IS advance. It has even allowed the dispirited Iraqi army and the vastly overrated Kurdish peshmerga to push IS back from some of the territories it had conquered.

There are problems, however, with overreliance on airpower. The militants have learned to disperse, to tunnel, to use camouflage and to go to ground in the cities. Airpower can degrade but it cannot

uproot an entire system of control over territory, people and infrastructure. IS is capable of regressing back to pure terrorism, a tactic in which it is thoroughly adept.

Second, the strategy calls for the training and equipping of the Iraqi army and the peshmerga. The United States looks set to throw more good money after bad, as indicated by the failures in summer 2014 of the Iraqi army — on which the United States had already spent \$24 billion. Two IS battalions with a total of 800-1,200 men took Mosul in June from two Iraqi divisions with a combined strength of 30,000 men. The army is a victim of the failures of Iraq's body politic: sectarian tensions; promotion on the basis of ethnosectarian kinship ties rather than professionalism; corruption on a massive scale; and poor command, control and communications systems — due to the politician's mistrust of the officer corps. The best military equipment in the world will not make a difference if societal problems are not addressed.

The peshmerga are better disciplined than the Iraqi army, though organizationally weak. They have relied too much on their historical memory of being vaunted guerrilla fighters against various Iraqi regimes. The word "peshmerga" (those who face death) was evocative of their courage and tactical prowess. But they were defeated by IS in June as well. They are not a flexible or well-trained force able to deal with the wide range of military contingencies they recently faced, from guerrilla tactics to mobile hybrid warfare. The peshmerga are split between the two Kurdish political parties that dominate the region; there is no unified command and control. The peshmerga are more likely than the Iraqi army to benefit quickly from U.S. largesse and training. However, politi-

cal and strategic considerations dictate that the United States cannot focus on making the Kurds combat-capable ahead of the central government in Baghdad.

Third, the strategy calls for bombing Syria, where the problems associated with bombing Iraq also apply. They may be worse; IS has embedded itself more deeply in eastern Syria. Moreover, it is unclear whether the proposed bombing campaign in Syria is about weakening IS or the Assad regime. Many in the United States hope for the destruction of the regime, but this would be a deviation of focus.

Fourth, the strategy calls for training and arming the Syrian rebels. Which ones? The United States often uses the word *moderates* with respect to the Middle East. However, the Syrian rebels are not moderate — three years of savage civil war have seen to that — and most are incapable of dealing with IS.

Fifth, the strategy called for bringing a coalition of European and regional allies on board in the fight. What will be the division of labor? It would seem that each country needs to be asked what it can contribute to the struggle. The most capable U.S. allies — Britain, France and Australia — will be at the "pointy end of the spear" alongside the United States.

Sixth, the United States says it will not put troops on the ground or see a *modus vivendi* with the Syrian and Iranian regimes. Western air power and a reliance on weak local ground forces will, however, not achieve even degradation of the IS system of control. What is likely required is the presence of enough Western ground forces to plant a small footprint in both Iraq and Syria. The United States and its Western allies have the most capable special operations forces in the world. They devastated al-Qaeda. The decapitation of IS leadership



and personnel, and those allied with it, can be done most effectively by ground forces. They would enable the United States and its allies to work to decouple the Sunni tribes and former insurgents from IS. This would require the United States to put to use its recent experience of working with the Sunni community in their joint fight against the jihadists between 2006 and 2009. The Islamic State was established as a result of ISIS military successes in Syria in early 2014, when it kicked the other jihadist groups out of Raqqa, and in Iraq in summer 2014, when it conquered Mosul and other areas. Ground forces would be able to reduce the territories under IS control and thus work to delegitimize it.

Of course, IS cannot be defeated purely by military means. Political and diplomatic engagement with the Kurds and the central government in Iraq will be necessary. Israel and the Kurds are maneuvering to grant an independent “Kurdistan” as much Iraqi territory as possible. While the Kurds should be rewarded for their cooperation in defeating IS, this will cause problems if it comes at the territorial expense of what remains of Iraq. It will reinforce Sunni Arab grievances; they stand to lose the most in the territorial carve-up in the north. Coaxing Baghdad to offer political positions and economic equity in return for further military aid and training — as well as to ensure restraint by the Kurds — can only be done by the United States.

There is considerable pressure on Washington to ignore or bypass Syria and Iran. Israel and Saudi Arabia certainly want to keep these so-called “rogue states” weak. A parade of self-styled U.S. experts on the region has been promoting the idea that the solution to this mess lies in the overthrow of the Assad regime. It is

strategically myopic, recalling the idea that the best way to deal with al-Qaeda was to overthrow Saddam Hussein, when the focus should have been on Afghanistan. Engaging Iran does not mean appeasement. It means warning Tehran not to engage in machinations that are at variance with U.S. efforts to rebuild the Iraqi body politic and military along national rather than sectarian lines.

Syria cannot offer much help against IS; it is overstretched and untrustworthy. However, a policy of supporting the opposition is fraught with danger. The “moderate” opposition will turn on Assad and ignore IS; they have, in effect, been doing so. The non-IS jihadists, many affiliated with al-Qaeda, will watch as their two opponents fight each other and the United States deals with IS. These non-IS jihadists should not emerge as the winners in this melee. This does, of course, create a problem; the U.S. targeting of Jabhat al-Nusra in late September 2014 led that organization to issue threats against the West and begin working with IS forces in Syria.

ISIS did not appear out of the blue. Much of its revival has been due to events such as the Syrian civil war, but also to the fecklessness and monumental failures of the Iraqi government. Its successes and continued existence were perpetuated by the inability of regional governments and the United States to recognize it as a dire threat until summer 2014. The chances for crushing the insurgent terrorist menace are greatest when both the endogenous and exogenous challenges to the Islamic State are maximized simultaneously. This will require a more sophisticated approach than that currently being implemented by the United States and its allies.

<sup>1</sup> This section is derived from my forthcoming work on the origins and evolution of ISIS/IS; Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (Cornell University Press, 2006); Ahmed S. Hashim, *Iraq's Sunni Insurgency* (Adelphi Paper No. 402, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Routledge, 2009); and several other works cited below.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Rabil, "The ISIS Chronicles: A History," *National Interest*, July 17, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-isis-chronicles-history-10895...>; and Bobby Ghosh, "ISIS: A Short History," *Atlantic*, <http://theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/isis-a-short-history/376030/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Translation of Old Al-Zarqawi Interview, Says God's Law Must Rule 'Entire World,'" GMP2006121181001, *Jihadist Websites – Open Source Report*, December 06, 2006, Open Source Center.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> See Hashim, *Iraq's Sunni Insurgency*, 34-35.

<sup>7</sup> For details, see Muhammad al-Najjar, "Al kati'a bayn al-Zarqawi wa al-Maqdisi: al-khilafatun fi tafsir aw inqisam fi al-tayyar al-salafi?" (The Estrangement between Al-Zarqawi and Al-Maqdisi: Disputes in Interpretation or Splits in the Salafi Trend?), *Al Sabil*, July 19, 2005, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Yaman Mukhaddab, "Al-Qa'ida between a Past Stage and One Announced by Al-Muhajir," *Al-Thabitun ala al-Ahd*, [www.althabeton.co.nr](http://www.althabeton.co.nr) (link may be obsolete), in GMP20061115281002, Open Source Center, November 15, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Aaron Zellin, "Abu Bark al-Baghdadi: Islamic State's Driving Force," British Broadcasting Corporation News – Middle East, July 31, 2014, [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28560449](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28560449).

<sup>11</sup> Space does not permit discussion of the second echelon governing structure, which consists of the media, the sharia committee and its subdivisions, and the treasury. These are discussed in my longer forthcoming monograph.

<sup>12</sup> I have analyzed the document for my forthcoming monograph. For a good summary, see Murad Batal al-Shishani, "The Islamic State's Strategic and Tactical Plan for Iraq," Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor* 12, no.16 (August 8, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Kurt Eichenwald, "Iraq's ISIS Is Eclipsing Al-Qaeda, Especially With Young Jihadists," *Newsweek*, July 18, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1544324758?accountid=12665>; Margaret Coker, "The New Jihad — A Brazen New Generation of Battle-Hardened Extremists Has Rebelled against al Qaeda, Seeing the Old Guard's Leadership as too Politically Passive and Restrained in the Use of Violence," *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2014, C1.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Caris and Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria," Middle East Security Report No.22, Institute for the Study of War, July 2014, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in "ISIS' Rise Pushes Iraq to Brink," *Der Spiegel Online*, June 25, 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-rise-of-the-jihadist>.

<sup>16</sup> See Matt Bradley and Ali Nabhan, "Almost Helpless": In Iraq, Fledgling Army Is Outmatched on Battlefield," *Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 2014, A1; Toby Dodge, "Can Iraq Be Saved?" *Survival* 56, no. 5 (2014), 11-12; Matt Bradley and Julian Barnes, "Iraq Army's Ability to Fight Raises Worries — U.S. Says Decline of Local Forces Leaves Country Vulnerable to Sunni Insurgents," *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 2014, A8.

<sup>17</sup> The theoretical underpinnings for this section are derived largely from Paul Staniland's new work, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Cornell University Press, 2014).