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AFFILIATE TO THE RISE OF
THE ISLAMIC CALIPHATE:
THE EVOLUTION OF THE
ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ
AND SYRIA (ISIS)**

Policy Report
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Who and What is ISIS/IS?

The dramatic victories of the Islamist militant group—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the summer of 2014 culminated in the declaration of the Caliphate or Islamic State (IS) under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. These twin events have alarmed the international community. ISIS and the Islamic State has been the subject of enormous literature that often baffles due to the profusion of unverified and contradictory information. Telling the story of ISIS and its creation, the Islamic State is a work in progress. Confusion still reigns concerning who ISIS is—a fact that was also reflected in the endless and fruitless debate over what to call it.¹

More important are the questions about ISIS that have arisen during the course of 2014. What does it want? What accounted for its

astounding military successes? Similarly, what was behind its leader's decision to declare a Caliphate? Will it replace Al-Qaida, with whom it has been feuding, as the primary Islamist militant group? Will the United States and its allies succeed in defeating the Islamic State or merely just thwart it? What will happen to its followers, particularly the thousands of foreign fighters, if concerted and effective military action by the United States and its allies manage to destroy the Islamic State's system of control over people, territory and infrastructure in both northern Iraq and eastern Syria? This report is a reconstruction from a multitude of open sources seeking to provide a concise overview of its origins, ideology, goals and military operations 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.² In 2000 a Jordanian one-time criminal-turned-Islamist named Abu Musa'b al-Zarqawi (AMZ) stood up a group called Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJ) to fight the Jordanian government.³ Having no luck in taking on the Jordanian authorities, Zarqawi travelled to Afghanistan to go fight on the side of the Afghan Mujahidin—resistance—in the Jihad or holy war against the Soviets. He arrived after the departure of the Soviet troops and soon returned to his homeland. Once again his efforts to fight the well-entrenched Jordanian monarchy 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 organisation, the Al-Qaida. AMZ claimed that it was Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian Jordanian Islamist thinker who exhorted Arabs to go fight the Soviets alongside the Afghan Mujahidin, who influenced him on the path of jihad: "We used to receive some audio-cassettes recorded by Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, may he rest in peace. He had a great influence on my decision to engage in jihad."⁴

¹ The nomenclature issue in this report is simple: 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, see Zack Beauchamp, "ISIS, Islamic State or ISIL? What to call the group the US is bombing in Iraq," *OSINT Journal Review*, September 17, 2014.

² This section is derived from Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006, Ahmed S. Hashim, *Iraq's Sunni Insurgency*, Adelphi Paper, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London: Routledge, 2009 and several other works that will be cited accordingly throughout the analysis.

³ Robert Rabil, "The ISIS Chronicles: A History," *The National Interest*, July 17, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-isis-chronicles-history-10895...> Bobby Ghosh, "ISIS: A Short History," *The Atlantic*, <http://theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/isis-a-short-history/376030/>

⁴ "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*, https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_5766_972_0_43/htt



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Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi moved to Iraq. There he developed extensive ties with Ansar al-Islam (“Partisans of Islam”), a Kurdish Islamist group in the extreme northeast of the country. 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 stabilise and progress towards democracy. By summer 2003 the Sunni minority—toppled from their position of power in Iraq with the downfall of Saddam Hussein—launched a deadly insurgency. The insurgency consisted of five distinct groups. Four groups were composed largely of Iraqis from the former regime, nationalists, tribal elements and various local Islamist fighters. The fifth group consisted of a smattering of Iraqis and foreign fighters who joined AMZ and his group JTJ.

The goals of JTJ were: (i) to force a withdrawal of coalition forces from Iraq; (ii) to topple the Iraqi interim government; (iii) to assassinate collaborators with the occupation regime; (iv) to target the Shia population; and (v) to establish an Islamic state in which the Shari’ah—God’s Law—would reign supreme. AMZ declared that the political platform of his organisation was clarified by a particular saying attributed to Prophet Mohammed: “I was sent to the world with a sword in my hand until all worship would be devoted to Allah alone.”⁵ AMZ further elaborates his breath-taking project:

We will fight in the cause of God until His shari’ah 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 shari’ah 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 shari’ah all over the globe...⁶

In pursuit of his goals AMZ left a trail of death and destruction within Iraq. JTJ differed considerably from other Iraqi insurgent groups in its tactics. Rather than using only guerrilla tactics in ambushes, raids and hit-and-run attacks against U.S. forces like the other groups did, it relied heavily on suicide bombings, often using car bombs or individual suicide bombers. It targeted a wide variety of groups, including the Iraqi Security Forces, political and religious figures, civilians, foreign civilian contractors, and the United Nations and humanitarian workers. AMZ was very adept at using the Internet to promote his message, recruit personnel and terrorise his enemies. Zarqawi’s volunteers posted messages from their leader and videos of beheadings on multiple servers to avoid delays in downloading and also making it difficult for the material to be removed from the World Wide Web.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

AMZ joins Al-Qaida

AMZ brought his group under the loose control of Osama bin Laden, with the group officially pledging allegiance to Osama's Al-Qaida network in a letter in October 2004. The new organisation known as *Tanzim Qai'dat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* (or Al-Qaida in Iraq—AQI—in English) provided Al-Qaida with a ready-made base from which to strike the U.S. and AMZ with the prestige of being part of a brand name; this drew recruits, financial and logistical support.

AQI elaborated a more cohesive ideological vision than AMZ's original organisation. In March 2005, AQI published its "creed and methodology" in which it expressed its determination to promote and defend *tawhid*—monotheism—and eliminate polytheism. Anyone who did not believe in the essential unity/oneness of God was an infidel and subject to *takfir* [excommunication] and death. AQI expressed the belief that the Prophet Muhammad is God's messenger for the entire human race. AQI viewed secularism—*ilmaniyah*—and all other 'isms' like nationalism, tribalism, communism and Ba'thism as "blatant violation of Islam." Jihad was the duty of all Muslims if the infidels attacked Muslims and their territories. Waging jihad against the enemies of Islam is next in importance to the profession of the *shahada*—faith. AQI argued that all Muslims—excluding the Shia, of course—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 clear-cut and explicit:

- i. Remove the aggressor from Iraq.
- ii. Affirm *tawhid*, oneness of God among Muslims.

- iii. Propagate the message that "there is no god but God", to all the countries in which Islam is absent.
- iv. Wage jihad to liberate Muslim territories from infidels and apostates.
- v. Fight the *taghut* ruling Muslim lands.
- vi. "Establish a wise Caliphate" in which the Sharia rules supreme as it did during the time of Prophet Mohammad.
- vii. "Spread monotheism on earth, cleanse it of polytheism, to govern according to the laws of God..."⁷

AMZ and Al-Qaida Central (AQC) the top leadership saw eye to eye on ideology and goals. Problems arose over AQI's *modus operandi* and tactics in Iraq. AMZ's tactic of engaging in mass civilian casualties—earning him the sobriquet "sheikh of the slaughterers"—aroused grave concern in his mentor, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a leading Salafist thinker based in Jordan and among Al-Qaida leaders, including second in command at the time, Ayman al-Zawahiri. In July 2005, differences in opinion between al-Maqdisi and AMZ came out into the open. In his "Message of Support and Advice" that Maqdisi published in his website *Minbar al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad*, he advised AMZ to stop targeting civilians, churches and Shias. AMZ responded that the advice was unfair.⁸ AMZ viewed the Shias as rejectionists and apostates, and stipulated that fighting them was more important than fighting non-Muslims. In response to al-Maqdisi, AMZ unswervingly focused his ire on the Shias whom he blamed 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.⁹

⁷ See Ahmed S. Hashim, *Iraq's Sunni Insurgency*, Adelphi Paper No.402, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London: Routledge, 2009, pp.34-35.

⁸ For details see Muhammad al-Najjar, "Al kati'a bayn al-Zarqawi wa al-Maqdisi: al-khalafatun 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, p.4.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.4.

Ayman al-Zawahiri sent a letter to AMZ on 9 July 2005, which was intercepted by U.S. forces. In the letter, Zawahiri expressed total agreement with the goals of the jihadist military efforts in Iraq but added that there were grave reservations with AMZ's *modus operandi*. The jihadists cannot win unless they win the hearts and masses of the Muslim (Sunni) masses and the *ulema*. More locals—Iraqis—need to be the face of AQI. The Taliban in Afghanistan lacked popular support; hence they

succumbed. Zawahiri added that the Shias are truly treacherous and cannot be trusted, but is it necessary to take them on and slaughter them in such a manner? It alienates Muslim opinion and it distracts the jihadists from fighting the Americans. The conflict with the Shias can wait. Finally, is it really necessary, asks Zawahiri, to engage in public displays of brutality as in the beheadings of hostages? This was not good public relations.

The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State of Iraq

It is not clear what impact AQC's expression of concern had, but in January 2006, AQI created an umbrella organisation called the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), in an attempt to unify Sunni insurgents in Iraq and to get them to accept AQI as the leader of the resistance. It failed on two distinct levels. First, many of the local Iraqi insurgents were not interested in AQI's expansive ideology; they were simply focused on ejecting the occupier from Iraq. Second, AQI's efforts to recruit Iraqi Sunni nationalists and secular groups were undermined by the violent tactics it used against civilians in its zeal to implement its vision of Islam. The stage was set for a massive break in relations between Iraqi insurgents and AQI. The U.S. military killed Zarqawi on 7 June 2006. A top AQI operative "Abu Hamza al-Muhajir," (aka Abu Ayub al-Masri) was promoted to be AQI representative in Iraq. Soon after, the organisation announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. These two top AQI leaders were behind the setting of the Islamic state in 2006. 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." ¹⁰

The first Islamic state project was a failure. The jihadists simply did not have the resources or personnel to set up a state to rule over territory and people. Furthermore, the death of AMZ did not lessen the jihadists' reign of terror, which massively alienated potential supporters. The loss of support from the Sunni tribes and Iraqi insurgents accelerated because of ISI's brutality, its attempts to muscle in on Sunni economic enterprises and its propensity for messing around with Sunni tribal mores and customs. The falling out led to the emergence of the *Sahwa*—'Awakening'—movement of the tribes and Sunni insurgents who allied with their erstwhile enemy the U.S. to fight ISI in return for promises to integrate the Sunni fighters into the Iraqi security services and for economic largesse to Sunni-majority areas. The weight of force directed against them proved too much for ISI. By 2008, ISI was describing itself as being in a state of "extraordinary crisis."

ISI was defeated or so it seemed. In early 2009, U.S. forces began pulling out of cities across the country, turning over the task of

¹⁰ Quoted in Yaman Mukhaddab, "Al-Qa'ida Between a Past Stage and One Announced by Al-Muhajir," *Al-Thabitun ala al-Ahd*, www.alphabeton.co.nr (link may be obsolete), in GMP20061115281002, *Open Source Center*, November 15, 2006, https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_10160_989_0_43/...

maintaining security to the vastly enlarged and on the surface now capable Iraqi Security Forces. To the consternation of the American and Iraqi governments from mid and late 2009, the ISI rebounded in strength and launched a concerted effort to cripple the Iraqi government. During August and October 2009, ISI launched a series of deadly sabotage attacks on government infrastructure and terror attacks against civilians that killed hundreds. ISI suffered a significant blow on 18 April 2010, when its top leadership, Abu Ayub al-Masri and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi were both killed in a joint U.S.-Iraqi raid near Tikrit. By June 2010, 80 per cent 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 state for the emergence of the current and most successful leader of this organisation, namely Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai (aka Dr Ibrahim, Abu Dua, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). It is said he is descended from Prophet Muhammad and that he hails from the al-Bu Badri tribe, which is primarily based in Samarra and Diyala. U.S. forces arrested Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in February 2004 and released him in December 2004 because he was not deemed to be a High Value Target.¹¹

Arising Like a Phoenix from the Ashes: ISI Re-Emerges

Between 2010 and 2013 four key factors contributed to the re-emergence of ISI: (i) ideological and organisational re-structuring of ISI coupled with the rebuilding of its military and administrative capacities; (ii) the dysfunctional nature of the Iraqi state and its growing conflict with the Sunni population; (iii) the fading away of Al-Qaida under Ayman al-Zawahiri's leadership; and (iv) the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War.

Clear Ideological Vision and Organisational Re-Structuring

ISI goals became more nuanced and more concisely articulated by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the overthrow of *taghuti*—illegitimate—governments and the creation of an Islamic State or Caliphate. The worldview of ISIS and the Islamic State has been elaborated in detail in the movement's glossy magazine, *Dabiq*, of which there have been four issues to date (November 2014). The first issue dealt with a discussion of the importance of the declaration of the Caliphate by Al-Baghdadi among other matters. The new Caliphate represents the onset of a new era of "might and dignity" for

the Muslims.¹² The singular 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 for this event. It differs from Al-Qaida in that it has been able to articulate an effective—to date—vision or grand strategy and military strategy for implementing its goals. Even if ISIS fails and there is every indication that it will over-reach itself, this vision is remarkable for its audacity.

Having an ideology and goals of breath-taking ambition is not sufficient. ISI was both a mess and moribund when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over; his work of reviving the organisation began in 2010 and eventually culminated in the organisational structure we know of today. Much of the success of ISIS is due to the creation of a cohesive, disciplined and flexible organisation by al-Baghdadi and other Iraqis that he hired for the purpose of rebuilding the organisation, including, it is alleged, a shadowy senior former Iraqi army officer by the alias of "Hajji Bakr." First, Abu Bakr began by learning from and avoiding the mistakes of AMZ and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. AMZ expended more

¹¹ Aaron Zellan, "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Islamic State's driving force," *British Broadcasting Corporation News – Middle East*, July 31, 2014, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28560449

¹² "Khilafah Declared," *Dabiq*, Issue No.1 (Ramadan 1435/Summer 2014), pp.6-9.

energy on spectacular and provocative attacks rather than on creating a solidly anchored organisation. AMZ's successor Abu-Umar al-Baghdadi, on the other hand, focused on the mind-numbing minutiae of the organisation and micro-managing his subordinates. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi built a hierarchical and centralised organisation that was flexible enough to allow its subordinate leaders wide latitude to do as they saw fit in the field as long as it was within the mission guidelines established by the leader.

Second, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi reduced the role of the Arab expatriates in the leadership posts within the organisation. The presence of foreign Arabs in top leadership posts had irritated potential Iraqi supporters in the past. Instead they are 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 Ba'thist regime, to fill in the top layers of ISIS and then of the IS.

Third, he divided the organisation into *al-imara*, the leadership or the executive, which is 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 organisation is divided into first and second echelon structures. 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 *al-imara* in importance; it consists of al-Baghdadi himself and the 'cabinet' of the Islamic State. It consists of 9 to 11 members who can theoretically dismiss the leader of the organisation if he does not carry out his duties in a manner ordained by his office.

The Military Council makes military policy and plans military operations. The head of the Military Council is directly chosen by al-Baghdadi. The Military Council consists of the head of the council and three members. It oversees the military commanders in the various *wilayat*—provinces—that make up the Islamic State and the various units of the Islamic State. Careful observation of data suggests that the military contingents are distinct groups made up of Iraqis directly in IS battalions, associated local fighters from the former regime, and foreign fighters mainly from Arab countries (the Westerners—including those of Middle Eastern descent—are in Syria in IS units in Ar-Raqqa), except for the fearsome and combat-effective Chechen foreign fighters who, it was alleged, played a key role in routing the Iraqi Army in Mosul.

Intelligence and military personnel from the old Iraqi army and security services of Saddam Hussein's era helped set up and run the Security and Intelligence Council (SIC). SIC has a wide range of duties: (i) provision of a protective security detail for al-Baghdadi and ensuring security for his movements and engagements; (ii) it ensures the maintenance of communications between al-Baghdadi and the *wulah*—'provincial governors'—and that the latter implements the Caliph's decisions; (iii) overseeing the execution of court rulings and the execution of penalties; (iv) provision of counter-intelligence to prevent infiltration of the Islamic State by its enemies; (v) overseeing the transportation of mail and maintaining the security of communications among the various branches of the Islamic state in Syria and Iraq; (vi) maintenance of special detachments for conducting assassinations, kidnapping and collection of funds headed by former members of the Ba'thist 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 as it pertains to the funding of its 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 as there are many unverified statements of 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 oilfields under its control; it exports oil to the Syrian government and Iraqi Kurdish region and to Turkish groups. It taxes the population under its control and it engages in the time-honoured tactic of 'extortion' from businesses.

ISI Grand Strategy

The resilient and flexible organisation that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi built enabled him to formulate and implement an effective grand strategy in which the goals are matched to a set of operational plans for achieving those goals. ISIS grand strategy is based on lessons learned from the failures of the past, particularly those of the former parent organisation, Al-Qaida, and from two key works: *Idarat al-Tawwahush: Akhtar Marhala satamur biha al-umma* [The Management of Savagery: The Most Dangerous Period Through Which the Umma is Passing] by Abu Bakr Naji (aka Muhammad Abu Khalil al-Hakaymah?) written in 2009 and *Khouta Istrategiyah li Ta'ziz 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 by members of the Iraqi group Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2010.

"*Management of Savagery*" argues that carrying out a campaign of constant violent attacks in Muslim states will eventually exhaust the states' ability and will to enforce authority, and as the writ of the state withers away, chaos or savagery *tawwahush*—will ensue. If

the state is facing serious internal and external difficulties such as civil war or revolution or attack from outside, the jihadists can take advantage of such situations to weaken the *taghuti* regime even more by attenuating its control over its territories. The prevailing state of anarchy would allow jihadists 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 2007-2008. It is in this context, that *Khouta Istrategiyah* was written. It called for taking measures to improve the political and military positions of the ISI so that it would be ready to capture and control territory once the Americans leave Iraq. It will then be in position to set about creating the Caliphate. Operationally, the *Khouta* calls on ISI to coordinate its political and military efforts, to execute an effective PSYOPS campaign against the Iraqi security forces, and implement a jihadist equivalent of the 'awakening' campaign.

ISI's military revival was on full display even before the events of 2014 and its attacks were characterised by their sheer ferocity, frequency and lethality. Between March and April 2011, the ISI claimed 23 attacks south of Baghdad. On 5 May 2011, an attack in Hilla killed 24 policemen and wounded 72 others. On 15 August 2011, a wave of ISI bombings in Mosul resulted in 70 deaths. On 22 December 2011, a series of coordinated car bombings and IED attacks struck over a dozen neighbourhoods across Baghdad, killing 63 people and wounding 180. The carnage continued into 2012. Al-Baghdadi announced a campaign of "Breaking the Walls" in July 2012 that made

freeing imprisoned members a top priority. The freed prisoners provided the organisation with effective combat and administrative leaders in the coming years. This was followed by the July 2013 campaign titled, "Soldier's Harvest", which targeted members of the Iraqi security forces. By the end of 2012 ISI had developed a military cadre capable of waging a sustained terror campaign, of conducting raids on government forces, and of launching well-planned attacks on government infrastructure.

The dysfunctional nature of the Iraqi State and Sunni-Shia Rift

Outside observers viewed the rise of Nuri al-Maliki in 2006 to the office of Prime Minister of Iraq positively. The country at the time was in the midst of large-scale violence and, though diffident and lacking charisma, Maliki surprised people with his decisiveness; particularly in taking on armed militias and death squads that had been tearing the country apart. He promised the Americans that he would reach out to the Sunni population and insurgent groups that had turned against the jihadist terrorist threat. When the time came for the Americans to withdraw in late 2011, observers of the Iraqi political scene were initially convinced that Iraq was on a path towards growth, development and stability. This did not happen. Now, three years later, Maliki has been ignominiously kicked out of power, ethnic and sectarian violence is at an all-time high, the country is on the verge of dissolution, and the jihadist threat is back.

From 2009 onwards, the western Sunni provinces such as Anbar, Nineveh and Salahudin witnessed large scale, well-organised and well-managed demonstrations demanding improved standards of life, better job opportunities and greater representation in the political process. Maliki simply ignored these pleas from the Sunni community who he despised and viewed as being nostalgic for

the time of Saddam Hussein.¹³ In 2012, Maliki began marginalising the Sunnis politically. He went after Sunni politicians, seeking to eliminate them from the political process. He purged hundreds of Sunnis from the military, security and intelligence services. By 2013, the Sunni regions of Iraq were engaged in their own localised version of an Arab Spring; inevitably Maliki responded with the use of force. The Sunnis then responded with taking up arms. The anger with Maliki drove many Sunnis back to the jihadist organisation they had fought against so fiercely during the "Awakening."

The fading away of Al-Qaida under Ayman al-Zawahiri's Leadership

For the past four years, the fortunes of Al-Qaida have been the source of considerable analysis by experts. Some have argued that the Al-Qaida is still effective and doing well as a terrorist organisation because of its adaptability and ability to acquire adherents. Others have argued that with the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, the Al-Qaida has been in irretrievable decline. Its current boss Ayman al-Zawahiri has not been an effective leader. He is unable to control the affiliates associated with the Al-Qaida brand name; indeed, he has been accused of allowing too many groups to come in under the umbrella of the organisation. This situation has caused problems for Al-Qaida Central (AQC).

AQC, which is made up of the leadership does not have any military capacity and its sustainability lies in the successes of its franchises and affiliates. However, these sub-groups 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 organisation is a hierarchical entity with him in direct

¹³ See Andrew Philips, "The Islamic State's Challenge to international order," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.68, No.5 (2014), p.495.

command. Naturally, the sub-groups will do what is in their interests. On the other hand, the Al-Qaida 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-Qaida. This cannot be said of the former affiliate in Iraq going back to Zarqawi; it has always been the “black sheep.”

Finally, there seems to be a clear generational gap between the older veterans of AQC and the younger more ‘toxic’ generation being attracted to the likes of the Islamic State. Though it is difficult to gather social data accurately under present circumstances, while ISIS and its successor, IS, have attracted a wide range of people from all economic strata, it has done particularly well among a younger group ranging from the self-radicalised to the committed to those seeking adventure and for whom Al-Qaida no longer resonates. 9/11 happened a decade ago while ISIS has gone from success to success.¹⁴

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

The second chapter of ISI’s evolution begins with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War (March 2011–present) when it decided to intervene in the war against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Joining the jihadist fight against the Damascus government was logical for al-Baghdadi. The Assad regime is secular; a heterodox sect—the Alawites—whom most in the Islamic world do not view as Muslims dominated the regime which was trying to crush Muslims during the civil war. Furthermore, Syria was a serious battle space in which ISI fighters could hone their fighting skills and learn small-unit tactics in a war against an army that was more effective than the lacklustre Iraqi Army.

The Syrian battle space is politically complex. On the one side stood the Syrian regime and its internal and external supporters; on the other side was a myriad group of opponents ranging from secular nationalists, liberal democrats to Islamists of all different hues, including jihadists. Al-Baghdadi sent a number of operatives into Syria—mostly Syrian veterans of the Iraqi insurgency against the U.S. —to prepare for the entry of ISI into the Syrian battle space. A group of these veterans emerged as Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front) in 2012 under the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani (Golani) signifying that he hailed from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Al-Nusra did well in Syria against the forces of the regime. It increased its popularity in the war-torn city of Aleppo by establishing an efficient and well-disciplined structure for the distribution of food and medicines to the needy civilian population. This stood in marked contrast to the ill-disciplined and brutal behaviour of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) towards the people in that city and elsewhere. Trying to capitalise on JN’s successes, in April 2013, al-Baghdadi released a statement in which he announced that al-Nusra had been established, financed and supported by the Islamic State of Iraq. Al-Baghdadi declared that the two groups were merging under the name “Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham/Syria” (ISIS). The leader of al-Nusra, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, rejected the merger complaining that he had not 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 al-Nusra as Syrian; by contrast, ISIS

¹⁴ See 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, p.C1.

personnel are described as 'foreign' occupiers. While al-Nusra actively called and 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 focused on building an Islamic state. Its efforts in this direction allowed it to set up a proto-state in the Syrian city of Ar-Raqqa in the northeast where it built up "a holistic system of governance that includes religious, educational, judicial, security, humanitarian, and infrastructure projects..."¹⁵

In June 2013, al-Zawahiri addressed both leaders in a letter in which he ruled against the merger and appointed an emissary to put an end to tensions. Zawahiri stipulated that al-Nusra would fight in Syria and ISI in Iraq.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rejected Zawahiri's statement, declaring that the merger was going ahead. In October 2013, al-Zawahiri issued a ruling disbanding ISIS. Al-Baghdadi and others within ISIS contested al-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 does not recognise the 'artificial' Western Sykes-Picot boundaries created in the aftermath of World War I that had divided the Islamic *umma* into nations. Finally, it made no sense for the jihadists to fight disunited. In February 2014, after an eight-month power struggle, the Al-Qaida disavowed any relations with ISIS. In May 2014, Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri ordered al-Nusra to stop attacks on its rival ISIS but there was no reconciliation.

¹⁵ Charles Caris and Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria," Middle East Security Report No.22, *Institute for the Study of War*, July 2014, p.9.

‘Shock and Awe’ in Iraq: The ISIS Lightning Advance

When ISIS returned to Iraq in June 2014, the stage was already set for an insurgent version of “shock and awe.” ISIS concentrated its forces for a lightning attack on Iraqi forces and the capture of territory and cities. ISIS activated the operational links with former Ba’thist insurgents, many of whom had been 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 parallel shadow administration.¹⁶

ISIS Information Operations conducted by ISIS shura council leaders convinced several military and local leaders to resign and flee their posts, eventually giving rise to the Iraqi version of the “stab in the back” stories of betrayal. Remaining military units and civilian leaders were isolated and targeted by suicide bombers or assassination squads or when captured murdered en masse to send a message to remaining government forces. Most Sunnis had no reason to fight for the Maliki government and they deserted in large numbers. The statement of one Sunni security officer speaks volumes of the overall Sunni state of mind: “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?”¹⁷

The Iraqi Security Forces collapsed. Four Iraqi army divisions simply disappeared and cannot

be easily rebuilt. The 2nd Division was routed from Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, on 9 June and its four brigades were reduced to a rabble. The 1st Division lost two brigades in Anbar province in early 2014, then two more during the ISIS advance in June, with one brigade totally destroyed in Diyala province just northeast of Baghdad. The 3rd Division’s 6th and 9th Brigades fled the Islamic State’s advance in the north, and the 11th Brigade largely dissolved when its men went home. A small unit of the division’s 10th Brigade remained in Tel Afar, trapped by Islamic State forces. The 4th Division was also routed. Half its complement of personnel vanished; most deserted and went home while hundreds may have been massacred. Iraqi troops on the frontline were short of food, water and ammunition. They survived because the *ulema*—clerics—and charities in Samarra provided food for them. ISIS captured an enormous amount of equipment, including 1,500 armoured Humvees and large amounts of mortars and artillery pieces, including 52 GPS-guided 155mm M198 howitzers.¹⁸

The size of the Iraqi debacle in June 2014 became clear to American advisers turning up to assess the situation and to help rebuild the Iraqi Security Forces. The initial U.S. assessment found an incompetent military deeply infiltrated by Sunni militants and Shia militiamen, led by an unprofessional officer corps incapable of meeting the logistic needs of its soldiers in the field.¹⁹ The advisers concluded that Iraqi forces would be unable to launch offensive operations to roll back ISIS without help.

¹⁶ “Islamic State ascendant – Iraq struggles to tackle the proto-caliphate,” *Jane’s Terrorism and Security Monitor*, Vol.14, No.8, (September 01, 2014), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1553495861?accountid=12655>

¹⁷ 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>

¹⁸ This section is based on: Matt Bradley and Ali Nabhan, “Almost Helpless’: In Iraq, Fledgling Army Is Outmatched on Battlefield,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 2014, p.A1; Toby Dodge, “Can Iraq Be Saved?” *Survival*, Vol.56, No.5 (2014), pp.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, p.A8.

¹⁹ “Islamic State ascendant – Iraq struggles to tackle the proto-caliphate,” *Jane’s Terrorism and Security Monitor*, Vol.14, No.8 (September 2014), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1553495861?accountid=12665>

The Islamic ‘Caliphate’

The successes of ISIS led its leadership to view the situation as opportune for the establishment of an Islamic State. On 29 June 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 caliph or ruler. 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 and that they should ‘emigrate’ to the new state.

The declaration of the Caliphate reverberated around the region and the Islamic world. First, it had an impact on the ground in Syria and Iraq. Fearful of ISIS power in the wake of its military success in Iraq, a number of local leaders and tribal elders sought to avoid an armed takeover by ISIS forces and agreed to peaceful surrender of their militias and occupation of their towns and villages. These

surrenders and accretions of territory provided the Islamic State with territorial contiguity into Iraq’s al-Anbar province and allowed it to claim that it had erased the old colonial boundaries imposed by Western powers in the aftermath of World War I.

Second, the declaration of the Caliphate created a stir in Islamist circles, not least within AQC, which was taken aback for being upstaged in this manner. The event split jihadist thinkers and religious personalities as well as jihadist movements down the middle.²⁰ AQC and its supporters—who tended to be older and veterans of past jihads—argued that al-Baghdadi was an upstart who had no right to declare a Caliphate and that the time was inopportune and the manner in which it was declared—without consultation—was inappropriate.²¹ Al-Baghdadi and his supporters—who tended to be younger more militant jihadists frustrated by Al-Qaida’s seeming lack of vigour and success in recent years—declared that the military successes of ISIS on the ground provided both the legitimacy and opportunity to declare a Caliphate.²²

²⁰ “Infighting likely within Al-Qaeda affiliates over support for the Islamic State caliphate in Syria and Iraq,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, Vol.6, No.31, July 16, 2014.

²¹ “Caliphate a “deviant group” – Al-Qa’idah spiritual leader,” *British Broadcasting Corporation Monitoring Middle East*, July 02, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1541932791?accountid=12665>

²² “See, for example, Evan Jendruck, “Indonesian militant Islamists pledge allegiance to Islamic State,” *Jane’s Terrorism and Security Monitor*, Vol.14, No.8 (September 01, 2014); “Pakistani Taliban declares allegiance to ISIS,” *Financial Post* (Karachi), July 12, 2014.

Conclusion

The re-emergence of Al-Qaida in Iraq, its eventual transformation into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and split with Al-Qaida Central was unexpected. However, the signs had been there since 2010. Furthermore, no government expected the group to pose such a formidable military threat to Iraq throughout much of 2014. The threat posed by the Islamic State has prompted international military action headed by the United States and a small coalition of Western and Arab nations. The group's runaway lightning advance in Iraq was blunted by mid-August by the use of U.S. airpower against the highly mobile ISIS ground forces. Airstrikes have been 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. Nonetheless, the Islamic State continued to survive and elude defeat well into the end of 2014. In the places where IS forces have lost significant territory, this has been due to the actions of Iraqi ground forces that have been aided significantly by Iranian advisers from the Qods Special Forces unit of the Revolutionary Guards Corps—*Pasdaran*—the revolutionary armed force of the Islamic Republic of Iran

and which is distinct from the regular army. The United States is sending more ground forces to help re-train the Iraqi military and Kurdish *Peshmerga* forces. The threat of IS in Iraq and Syria cannot be dealt with solely by military force; it requires long-term political restructuring within both countries and this will not be easy.

The presence of thousands of foreign fighters from the Middle East, Europe, North America and Asia is one of the biggest issues facing the international community.²³ The issue of foreign fighters has two aspects. First, there is the prevention of people from traveling to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq. Foreign fighters constitute much of the oxygen keeping this movement alive. Second, there is the issue of dealing with the threat posed to host nations by returning fighters. Prevention of travel and post-jihad threat reduction could require affected nations to implement a host of legal measures that some might view as highly controversial. In conclusion, the dismantling of IS and its network is a task that will continue to occupy the energy of regional governments and the international community well into 2015.

²³ On the impact of IS in Asia, see Ahmed Hashim, *The Transnational Impact of ISIS and the Islamic State in Asia*, RSIS Report (forthcoming 2015).

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