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Enhancing Security through Collaborative Research

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## Welcome from the Editors

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to announce the release of Volume IX, Issue 4 (August 2015) of *Perspectives on Terrorism* at [www.terrorismanalysts.com](http://www.terrorismanalysts.com). Our free online journal is a joint publication of the *Terrorism Research Initiative* (TRI), headquartered in Vienna (Austria), and the *Center for Terrorism and Security Studies* (CTSS), at the Lowell Campus of the University of Massachusetts (United States).

Now in its ninth year, *Perspectives on Terrorism* has over 5,200 regular subscribers and many more occasional readers and visitors worldwide. The *Articles* of its six annual issues are fully peer-reviewed by external referees while its *Policy Briefs* and other content are subject to internal editorial quality control.

This special double issue is devoted entirely to the so-called Islamic State (IS), presenting 14 research articles on various aspects of the organization, in addition to an extensive, specially compiled bibliography on IS. The articles are products of a conference on IS held in Oslo on 11-12 June 2015. The conference was organized by the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) and funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and it brought together leading specialists on IS, jihadism, and civil war along with senior policymakers and government analysts from several countries.

The motivation for the conference – and for this special issue – was that our understanding of IS is lagging behind the group's battlefield advances. After a wave of studies on al-Qaida in Iraq in the mid-2000s, the academic community largely dropped the ball on the group's later incarnations ISI and ISIS until it burst onto the global stage last summer with the capture of Mosul. The past year has seen a substantial intellectual catch-up effort, not unlike that mounted for al-Qaida in the early 2000s, but we still have a long way to go.

The articles cover a broad range of topics and questions pertaining to IS as an organization. All of the articles were completed in July 2015 and are therefore unusually up-to-date as far as academic publishing goes.

The issue opens with two articles (by Charles Lister and Thomas Hegghammer/Petter Nesser) that address two of the most pressing questions today, namely, how is the military campaign against IS going, and how much of a terrorist threat to the West does IS pose?

The following three papers place IS in a historical and comparative perspective. Brynjar Lia looks at IS as the latest in a decades-long series of jihadi state-building efforts, Stathis Kalyvas asks what the comparative study of rebel groups can tell us about IS, while Truls Tønnessen examines the relationship between IS and its historical predecessors.

We then move on to ideology and propaganda with J.M. Berger's article on social media and millenarian beliefs, Iain Edgar's study of the night dreams of IS fighters, Aaron Zelin's analysis of one week of IS propaganda, and Joas Wagemaker's study of the concept of *bay'a* (allegiance) in IS's ideology.

The next three articles are concerned with how IS operates. Scott Gates and Sukanya Podder ask how IS deals with the organizational challenges that come with having many foreign fighters, Aymenn al-Tamimi presents a detailed analysis of the IS administration and bureaucracy, and Kirk Sowell takes a detailed look at IS's military and political operations in Ramadi and Fallujah.

The last two articles speak to the question of whether containment is a viable alternative strategy against IS. Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob Shapiro evaluates the long-term sustainability of the IS economy, while Clint Watts evaluates and pros and cons of a strict containment approach.

The final item in this issue is a comprehensive bibliography of IS compiled by Judith Tinnes. We are confident that these contributions will be of interest and use to scholars and policymakers seeking to understand the Islamic State. Also, please see the position announcement at the end of this issue from UMass Lowell, where they are searching for a new Professor and Director of the Center for Terrorism and Security Studies.

The issue was prepared by guest editor Thomas Hegghammer, Director of Terrorism Research at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), and co-editor Prof. James Forest, Director of Security Studies at UMass Lowell. The next issue (October 2015) will be prepared by editor-in-chief Prof. em. Alex P. Schmid.

## I. Articles

### A Long Way from Success: Assessing the War on the Islamic State

by Charles Lister

#### *Abstract*

*Since the U.S.-led coalition initiated military action against the Islamic State (IS) in northern Iraq in August 2014 and in Syria the following month, a number of victories have been achieved. However, progress thus far can best be described as a series of loosely linked tactical gains, rather than a significant strategic advance. The stated coalition objective is to “degrade and destroy” IS as a militant organization, but it remains a potent armed force capable of capturing valuable territory and inflicting considerable material damage on its adversaries. The time has now come for a bold and critical re-evaluation of the current anti-IS strategy and the core analytical understandings driving counter-actions. In addition to honestly assessing progress thus far in countering IS, this article highlights three key issues requiring acknowledgment and recommends their inclusion within the foundational thinking of a new and more effective counter-IS strategy.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, ISIS, Iraq, Syria, strategy, foreign policy

#### *Introduction*

Since the Islamic State’s (IS) declaration of a Caliphate (*khilafa*) in late-June 2014 and the initiation of U.S.-led coalition airstrikes against IS targets in northern Iraq in August 2014 and in Syria in September 2014, the terrorist organization has become an increasingly international phenomenon. In the weeks and months that followed, growing numbers of jihadist militants began swearing their loyalty (*bay’a*) to IS, answering IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s call for worldwide pledges of allegiance to his self-declared authority.

By early August 2015, IS and its “Leader of the Faithful” (*amir al-mu’minin*) Baghdadi – also referred to as Caliph Ibrahim – had accepted into the fold groups operating in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Nigeria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan-Afghanistan (Af-Pak) and Russia’s North Caucasus, in addition to its already existing force in Syria and Iraq. While some of these new IS affiliates – designated as “provinces” (*wilayat*) within the Caliphate – are operationally smaller than others, all have carried out attacks following their inclusion within the IS umbrella. Nonetheless, it remains unclear to what extent each international faction and each of the existing 36 provinces has established and consolidated solid command and control (C2) links to the IS central leadership in Syria and Iraq.

The clear and present threat posed by IS justifies, and indeed demands a counter-reaction by international states and the local governments who directly face IS on the battlefield. After nine months of coalition operations, a series of tactical-level victories have been won against IS in parts of Iraq and northeastern Syria, but these do not yet appear to amount to anything close to strategic progress in genuinely degrading and destroying IS as an organization. In fact, some facets of the strategies adopted may even prove counterproductive in the long-term.

Considering the sheer scale of IS operations in Syria and Iraq and the questionable nature of its command and control (C2) links with groups in other countries, the strategic priority for the international community should remain countering IS in its Iraqi and Syrian heartlands. However, the existing strategy is neither



sufficient in scale or design to effectively achieve this objective or to transform tactical gains into long-term strategic progress.

### ***Progress Assessment***

#### *Iraq*

Since the U.S. and its allied coalition began airborne operations against IS in northern Iraq on 8 August 2014, it has steadily lost a series of battles. Indeed, as Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello wrote in late April 2015, “the Islamic State has been on the defensive in Iraq for more than eight months and it has lost practically every battle it has fought.”[1] In Iraq’s largely Kurdish north, IS forces have faced defeat en route to Irbil, at the Mosul Dam and in Sinjar. Within the country’s interior and around the capital Baghdad, IS forces were defeated at the Haditha Dam, outside the Ayn al-Asad base, in Tikrit, Amerli, Dhuluiya, and Jurf al-Sakhar, to name only a few locations.

However, the Iraqi Army itself remains a debilitated force incapable of leading its country’s anti-IS operations. With approximately 48,000 active personnel, the army has been outnumbered and outperformed in Iraq’s core territories by the irregular Popular Mobilization Units (PMU, or *al-Hashd al-Sha’bi* in Arabic),[2] which count as many as 100,000 men within their ranks.[3] Formed in June 2014 following a *fatwa* issued by Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani that called upon his countrymen to mobilize and protect “their country and their people and their holy places,”[4] the PMUs are dominated by Shia Iraqi militias, including Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq, Kata’ib Hizballah, Kata’ib al-Imam Ali, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces and the Badr Organization.

With Iranian backing – including training, C2 coordination and supplies of both weapons and vehicles – the PMUs have emerged as effective counter-insurgent forces, leading the capture of Tikrit in mid-April 2015, for example. The increasingly visible presence of highly mobile Iranian *Safir* jeeps equipped with multiple rocket launchers (MRLs), launching platforms for improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs), and more recently modified versions of the American BGM-71 TOW anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) have become telltale signs of expanding Iranian military assistance to PMUs in Iraq. However, the close relationship with Iran and their largely sectarian makeup, sporadic allegations of anti-Sunni war crimes, looting,[5] and population displacement suggests the PMU’s short-term tactical victories may be outweighed by long-term damage caused to the central government’s reputation within Iraq’s Sunni heartlands.

Since its first days of operational existence in Iraq in 2003 as Jama’at al-Tawhid wa’l-Jihad, IS has sought to engender and exploit chaos by rupturing foundational social fabrics, especially inter-sectarian trust and cooperation. The preeminent role of a largely Shia force – whose leaders include commanders designated as international terrorists by the U.S. government[6] – in combating a Sunni extremist organization on Sunni territory is unlikely to heal existing societal rifts or to defeat the sectarian dynamics that IS has encouraged and fed off in Iraq for so many years.

When IS captured its third provincial capital, the city of Ramadi, on 17 May 2015 after more than a year of battle, Iraq’s Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was forced to call upon the PMUs to launch a counter-offensive. While Abadi was clearly stuck between a rock and a hard place in making such a decision, broader fears over the implications of a Shia-dominated militia force leading an assault on the provincial capital of Iraq’s most fervent Sunni heartland appeared reinforced when the operation was initially named *Labayka ya Hussein* (We are at your service, Hussein) – essentially a Shiite slogan.[7]

*Syria*

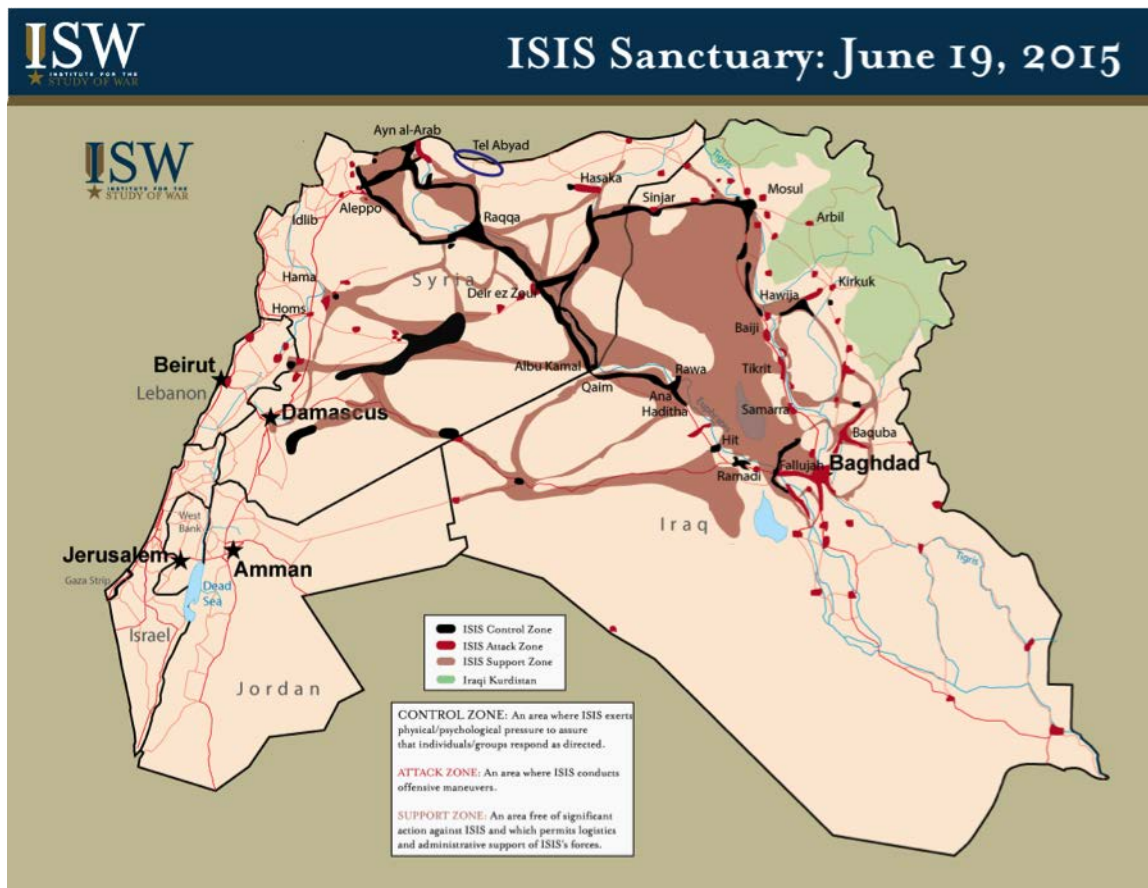
Meanwhile, in Syria, IS has faced a more limited coalition of countries targeting it from the air, with the U.S.-led effort seeking mainly to strike openly available targets largely in isolation from broader battlefield dynamics on the ground. The exception to this latter assessment thus far has been the coordination of strikes with Kurdish fighters combating IS in northern Syria, beginning most notoriously in Kobane (or Ayn al-Arab) in late 2014 and continuing elsewhere in the northeast in early 2015.

While Kobane attracted the world's attention and drew IS into expending hundreds-upon-hundreds of its fighters, the town was in fact of little strategic (let alone existential) value to IS, and its near total destruction and depopulation by March 2015 took away any sense of victory for the Kurds or the U.S.-led coalition. Despite this, the Kurdish militia Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) has been consistently effective, with its forces – often in coordination with coalition airstrikes – recapturing as many as 200 villages and towns in northeastern Syria in May 2015 alone. Moreover, its capture of the border town of Tel Abyad – a target of genuine strategic value to IS – in mid-June and of the nearby 93rd Brigade base on 22 June suggested Kurds had the military potential to threaten IS' de facto capital of Raqqa, provided coalition air support continued.

However, it remains unclear how committed the Kurdish YPG would be to expanding military operations and committing valuable resources beyond what is core Kurdish territory. Notwithstanding some statements suggesting that Raqqa city remains a YPG target, increasing tensions between the Kurdish militia group and the broader largely Sunni Arab opposition – which accused the YPG of ethnic cleansing in mid-June – may complicate their role when moving further into Syria's interior. Moreover, Turkey's recent airstrikes against IS in northern Aleppo and its resumption of conflict with the PKK threatens to undermine the YPG's role within anti-IS coalition operations. Although Turkey has at times made subtle distinctions between the YPG and PKK, the Syrian faction is nonetheless structurally part of the PKK's broader organisational umbrella and should Turkey-PKK hostilities continue to escalate, dynamics across northern Syria could fundamentally transform.

Moreover, reports that the Assad regime has begun using the predominantly Kurdish northeastern Hasakah governorate as a new base for Iranian military personnel and avowedly pro-regime Baathist Sunni militias[8] could serve to open new conflict fronts that may neutralize the potential for Kurdish progress against IS altogether.





Credit: Institute for the Study of War, June 2015.

IS' most strategically valuable territories – those that ensure the movement's long-term survival – in eastern Aleppo, Raqqa and throughout the governorate of Deir ez Zour have largely remained untouched, save for the daily targeted coalition strikes on vehicles, makeshift oil refineries, tactical weapons systems and groups of fighters. The key to IS's further degradation and sustainable long-term defeat in these regions lies with the predominantly Sunni insurgency, which proved its determined opposition to IS in early 2014 with a successful offensive that forced the group out of the governorates of Latakia, Idlib, and western Aleppo by March 2014. Insurgent forces have since prioritized the fight against the Assad regime, notwithstanding a few localized anti-IS offensives in western Qalamoun near the Lebanese border, around Damascus, in rural Homs, and in pockets of the southern governorates of Quneitra and Deraa.

Within today's current dynamics and the intensely complex nature of Syria's multi-front conflict, the moderate opposition *Syrian* insurgency – encompassing secular nationalist, 'moderate' and mainstream Islamist, as well as Salafist factions – remains either incapable or otherwise distracted from launching any all-out strategy to rid Syria of the acknowledged IS threat. The deployment of the first 54 members of the U.S. 'trained and equipped' New Syrian Forces (NSF) into northern Aleppo in mid-July has thus far been a catastrophic failure. In the days before being 'turned on' by their American backers, NSF leader Colonel Nadim al-Hassan, one of his deputies and four other fighters were kidnapped by Jabhat al-Nusra in an ambush and swiftly accused of being American agents sent to undermine the jihad in Syria. A day later, Jabhat al-Nusra launched a night-time assault on the headquarters of Colonel Hassan's 30th Division, killing five, wounding 18 and taking 20 prisoner. Commenting after the attack, unnamed U.S. officials remarkably claimed that they had expected Jabhat al-Nusra to "welcome" the 30th Division "as an ally in its fight against the Islamic State." [9]

It therefore seems likely that IS will retain control of much of its most valuable territories and indeed continue its ongoing and gradual infiltration and acquisition of new territory from both regime and opposition forces. In fact, increasing reports of suspected IS suicide bombings and assassination attacks targeting Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham in the northwestern governorate of Idlib suggest IS may be preparing the ground for a more overt expansion westwards.[10]

### *Re-assessing Strategy*

Since the initiation of coalition anti-IS operations, progress has clearly been made against the group in parts of Iraq. The group's operational momentum there has been definitively slowed, but IS nonetheless remains a potent militant force capable of inflicting considerable death and destruction and indeed, capturing territory – Ramadi being the case in point. While Kurdish forces have also made progress across the border in northeastern Syria, IS is sitting far more comfortably elsewhere in the country and despite its loss of Tel Abyad, appears to face no immediate existential threat.

In addition to its international expansion and declared management of 36 “provinces” across 10 countries, IS has operationally adapted in order to sustain an internal sense of momentum on the battlefield. While control of population centers is undoubtedly of critical value in providing the group with its most important source of revenue (tax and extortion, worth an estimated \$600 million in 2014 in Iraq alone[11]), the control and freedom of movement across a depopulated desert has proven crucial as strategic depth and a launching ground for varying levels of military and guerrilla activity.

IS has also set about fortifying its control of major urban centers – like Raqqa, Mosul and now Ramadi – through the use of trenches and constructed walls, the demolition of bridges, as well as the emplacement of huge numbers of booby traps and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) both inside towns and cities and on transport routes leading to them. For example, IS laid over 100 IEDs on one 8km stretch of road leading to Tikrit,[12] while Kurdish Peshmerga defused more than 6,000 IEDs on roads leading to IS-controlled territories in northern Iraq from August 2014 to March 2015.[13] Such defensive strategies aim to slow IS' adversaries, drain their resources and provide opportunities for IS militants elsewhere to launch diversionary operations. While IS has so notoriously proven itself capable of acting like a light infantry force, it remains at heart a determined and capable insurgency, which highly effectively exploits Robert Taber's famed image of a flea and a dog:

*The guerrilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog's disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with.[14]*

IS is clearly a determined enemy and poses a potent threat that the current coalition strategy is failing to effectively 'degrade and defeat.' In order to better counter IS and the broader terrorist threat emanating from Iraq and Syria, three key issues need to be addressed and acknowledged: IS's driving force(s), tactical gain vs strategic victory, and the importance of Syria.

### *IS's driving force(s)*

That IS is driven by a particularly extreme apocalyptic Salafi-jihadi ideology appears to have become an established view. Indeed, a close monitoring of the group's public rhetoric and propaganda materials underlines this assessment clearly. At its ideological heart, IS seeks to overthrow the existing world order, which it deems to be corrupt and inherently un-Islamic; to convert all people to Islam; and to rule all Islamic lands and eventually the world according to its fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. The establishment

of an Islamic State (first in Iraq in 2006, then again in Syria in 2013) and then its Caliphate (in June 2014) is seen as the foundation upon which this transnational and transformative Islamic order would be established.

Fatwas and other judicial writings by IS scholars on the treatment of Christians and Jews, as well as other ethnic minorities and sects, follow a similarly extremist vision of the world. The self-justification of the enslavement of Yazidis in Iraq and the taking of their women as concubines served as but one example of IS' driving Salafi-jihadi ideology.[15]

However, while this extremism feeds into IS' international propaganda, fuels its recruitment, and portrays the kind of fearsome image that can at times weaken the will of its adversaries on the battlefield, IS is similarly invested in another ideological driving force. On a more local and less internationally-visible level, IS' has consistently sought to portray itself as a movement devoted to defending the rights of disenfranchised, disaffected and repressed Sunni communities. In both Syria and Iraq, IS presents itself as a both an army and an alternative "state" to defend against and replace repressive or failed political systems perceived as oppressive to Sunni Muslims. In areas of both countries, it has been this socio-politically focused image that has been most effective at securing IS the kind of roots into sectors of society that provide the potential for long-term survival.

While this social driver, which could be said to be more akin to a "Sunni nationalism," has given IS opportunities to offer itself as a viable alternative, it has consistently followed this "carrot" up with a "stick" – in the form of overwhelming societal control through absolutist forms of law and order and behavioral codes. In times of chaos and instability – something IS actively seeks to cause and sustain – such a "carrot and stick" approach can potentially prove a highly effective method of territorial and population control, so long as the "carrot" is at least equal to if not superior to what else could be alternatively offered. By supplementing lost momentum in Syria and Iraq with the perception of growth more internationally through the acquisition of new affiliates, IS further enforces a sense of permanence within its controlled communities.

In isolation, it is thus right and justified that academics and practitioners seek to understand IS' extremist ideology and to design effective counter-narratives. However, a powerful counter-narrative requires a delivery mechanism sufficiently credible to convince those within IS and others potentially vulnerable to its message. This is an extraordinary challenge and one that no Western nor Middle Eastern government appears to have yet achieved.

Consequently, the most potent materially-focused policy one can use today against a group like IS is to ameliorate the socio-economic and political failures and divisions that are so evident within the countries IS is operating in – especially Syria and Iraq. Practically speaking, this would serve as a highly effective counter-narrative, of sorts.

In Iraq, the government in Baghdad must accelerate and expand on attempts to recover a nationalist image of a strong, united, multiethnic and multi-confessional society. In this respect, the international community has an urgent duty to coerce divisive elements within parliament and the broader political system to bolster the voices of credible Sunnis and to guarantee that continued financial and military assistance to the Iraqi government is made strictly conditional on progress in this regard. Considering the still primary role being given to the military effort to counter IS in Iraq, the role of Sunnis must be expanded significantly. Plans to form, train, arm and support a Sunni National Guard force and re-established local police forces drawn largely from Sunni tribes in Anbar must be followed through and be given preeminent roles on the frontline in both capturing territory and then holding it.

In Syria, it must be acknowledged that the continuation of the Assad regime remains one of IS' most effective recruitment tools and the Syrian security apparatus has been clearly duplicitous in facilitating – both directly and indirectly – the growth and expansion of IS as a means of harming and dividing the opposition insurgency. Despite countless international diplomatic statements declaring the Assad regime's loss of legitimacy, the U.S. and its coalition allies have consistently failed to defiantly confront the regime's survival. Thus far, this has only provided further time and space for jihadists like IS to operate unchallenged.

Without solving the foundational political issues in these countries, societal divides, instability and power vacuums will always exist for violent extremists to exploit. Only by acknowledging IS' use of such social cleavages to grow roots and expand will the international community stand a chance of genuinely challenging the survivability of the IS phenomenon.

### *Tactical Gains vs. Strategic Victory*

As a result of IS' well-known and preeminent slogan of 'lasting and expanding' (*baqiya wa tatamaddad*), it has been assumed that removing the group's operational momentum would catalyze its degradation and eventual destruction. When combined with the expectation that a Caliphate initially restricted to parts of Syria and Iraq should subsequently continue to grow in order to maintain its legitimacy, this assessment of IS' strategic weakness or vulnerability would appear justified.

However, the fact that IS' self-proclaimed Caliphate came under attack by foreign powers – who IS labels "Crusaders" – less than six weeks after its establishment lent the group an insurance policy. Any major future losses to the Caliphate could then be blamed on these "Crusaders" and their perceived "War on Islam," thus – IS would hope – encouraging further support from Muslims around the world.

This above-mentioned scenario is based on IS suffering serious strategic losses of territory and assets, which as has been explained, has not yet occurred as a result of the existing strategy and dynamics on the ground. Consequently, the kinds of losses imposed on IS in areas of northern Iraq, in Diyala and Salah ad Din, around Baghdad and in northeastern Syria should be read as important initial progress in preparing the ground for a more determined attempt at "rolling back" the group from its most valuable areas of control. Thus far however, these aforementioned victories have amounted by and large to tactical gains rather than strategic defeats to the IS movement.

Throughout the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq in the 2000s and especially during the latter years of the surge – during which IS sustained debilitating losses to its senior leadership – IS demonstrated remarkable resilience. Since August 2014, IS has adapted its force structure and operational tactics in order to sustain offensive operations amid more challenging circumstances. In addition to its more orthodox military assaults that have at times displayed "textbook infantry tactics,"[16] IS has demonstrated an ability to operate as an organization capable of hybridized warfare. In other words, depending on the specific dynamics prevalent within a single area of operations, IS has demonstrated a "shape-shifting ability" that both allows it to remain a step ahead of its adversaries while improving its chances of evading defeat on the ground or by air.[17] By maintaining such asymmetric capabilities, IS heightens its inherent advantage over conventional military adversaries.

Consequently, the current strategies being employed in Iraq and Syria to counter IS are vastly insufficient. Air power alone in Syria – except for in the Kurdish northeast – has only a minimal chance of even slowing IS' capacity to expand, which it has in fact continued to do since strikes began in September 2014, into additional areas of Homs, Damascus, Deir ez Zour and the Qalamoun. Although coordination between local ground forces and international air assets has been more common in Iraq, IS has yet to face a local



Sunni adversary that is capable of recapturing ground, countering the IS social and religious narrative, and supported by a central government perceived as sufficiently representative of Iraq's Sunni community. As effective as they have proven to be on the battlefield, neither Kurds nor Iranian-backed Shia militias possess such stabilizing capabilities.

### *Importance of Syria*

Since the beginning of anti-IS coalition operations in August 2014, Iraq has assumed priority status for the use of airstrikes, the provision of support to and coordination with armed actors on the ground, and other such activities. The partiality of coalition members to act in Iraq is entirely understandable considering the more favorable diplomatic circumstances and the perception that the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish authority in the north are bodies potentially worthy of partnership. Moreover, it is incontrovertibly true that the vast majority of IS' history has been developed on Iraqi territory.

However, countering IS should not be so Iraq-focused. Since its emergence in Syria as an active militant entity in May 2013, IS has invested heavily in dominating strategically valuable territory in parts of the country, including placing its capital in the city of Raqqa. It is no coincidence that the attack on Mosul in early June 2014 included units of fighters who had crossed from northeastern Syria and that after Mosul's capture, vast quantities of weaponry and finance were transported across the border into Syria within 24 hours.

The intensity of the Syrian conflict; the proliferation of armed factions on all sides; the huge influx of weapons; the divisive involvement of multiple regional and international states; as well as the brutality of the fighting itself makes the war in Syria a ripe candidate for intractability. All jihadist groups in the country, including IS, have invested in Syria precisely for this reason. The longer the conflict continues, the more unmanageable it will become and the more jihadists will find themselves operating within an environment that secures their long-term future. Thus, by placing the fight against IS in Syria on the backburner, the international community is in fact gifting the group with more time to consolidate its presence.

Moreover, the contiguity of IS' territorial control along the Euphrates River from Raqqa, through Deir ez Zour and across the border into Iraq's Anbar province en route to Baghdad provides IS with a critically important C2 and supply link between different fronts. The fall of Ramadi to IS on 17 May 2015 underlined the extent of IS' potential in Iraq's Anbar province and as of early June 2015, the group was in an even stronger position in Syria's eastern Deir ez Zour governorate, where regime forces held only half the provincial capital and an airbase on its southern periphery.

Whatever happens in Iraq and so long as the international community fails to more definitively push for a political transition in Damascus, Syria will remain a critical area of IS operations and a region of invaluable opportunities for the group. To counter IS most effectively, Syria and Iraq must be treated with equal importance and as part of a single unified strategy.

### *Looking Ahead*

President Obama confidently proclaimed on 11 February 2015 that "our coalition is on the offensive, ISIL is on the defensive, and ISIL is going to lose." [18] Two weeks later, the commander of U.S. Central Command, General Lloyd Austin III, told the U.S. Congress that coalition operations had killed an estimated 8,500 IS militants since August 2014, [19] and in late-July, that number stood at an estimated 15,000. [20] Considering the CIA had assessed IS' total manpower to have been no more than 31,500 in September

2014, these numbers appear quite remarkable. However, these figures could in fact potentially be considered realistic. After all, the UN estimated in April 2015 that at least 22,000 foreign fighters had travelled to fight jihad in Syria and Iraq since 2011,[21] a majority for IS. Considering local fighters are likely to count for considerably more, the CIA's estimate appears to have been conservative.

In fact, it seems feasible that when incorporating locally based recruits and those placed on standby or in civil guard-type roles within IS territory that the group could number as many as perhaps 70,000. In August 2014, Iraqi expert Hisham al-Hashimi suggested IS may have contained as many as 100,000 members.[22] A great deal of those fighters however, could be deemed only marginally loyal to the core IS cause. Should local governments and the international community succeed in "rolling back" IS from its core power centers and ensure the provision of a credible socio-political alternative to IS, the group may dwindle to a smaller core akin to the 20,000-31,500 the CIA suggested.

Numbers notwithstanding, U.S. Deputy Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL Brett McGurk was absolutely right in April 2015 when he clearly stated that IS "remains an adaptive and formidable foe ... so this is going to be a long-term campaign that is going to take years, not months." [23] However, while it is crucial that IS' proven ability to adapt and endure amid concerted attack be acknowledged, the lengthy duration of any fight against the group should not take away from the urgency of ensuring the strategy is right from the start. Recapturing villages and towns on IS' periphery is an important first step, but only if it comes as part of a broader strategic appreciation of the challenge ahead. Slowing IS momentum does not necessarily mean the group has been placed on the road to defeat, just as the destruction of makeshift oil refineries does not mean IS finances have been dealt an existential blow.

While some success has been secured since August 2014, the current counter-IS strategy does not appear sufficient to produce a sustainable and peaceful post-phase. There is today an urgent need for a bold and objective assessment of the thinking behind the coalition's current plan. An appreciation of the three points outlined in this paper is crucial, but more important perhaps than anything else is an acceptance that it will not be military action alone that stands a chance of degrading, let alone defeating an organization like IS. In fact, it could safely be said that IS will *never* be entirely defeated from the outside, but rather constrained to a minimal operational capability whereby its own internal dynamics under such pressure may lead to its self-destruction.

The key to defeating IS is solving the societal and political failures in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi central government and its security forces must be strongly pressured to become more genuinely representative of Iraq's diversity. Meanwhile, Iran's increasingly preeminent role in shaping paramilitary forces in Iraq should be restrained, both by nationalist Iraqis and if necessary, by the international community. In Syria, the international community must finally acknowledge that Bashar al-Assad does not represent anything close to a unifying figure for his country and it will only be through a political solution in the shape of a managed transition that Syrians can begin to take back control of their territory from groups like IS. A Syrian rebel train and equip program that envisages success in years and not months is miles from a recipe to success.

Finally and above all else, when considering both current and future regional and international security, today's IS-focused lens must be broadened. While IS' dramatic gains, brutal violence and declaration of a Caliphate may have temporarily out-performed al-Qaida in the global competition for jihadist pre-eminence, the latter organization is undergoing a process of renewed confidence, this time emanating from its affiliates in Syria and Yemen, rather than from its senior leadership in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) region, where the recently reported death of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar is likely to spark an at least temporary period of uncertainty and instability.

The consistent rise in power of al-Qaida's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra has been complemented by its adoption of pragmatic attitudes on the ground, which has thus far ensured its place as a recognized integral component of the overall opposition insurgency against the Assad regime. Since late 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra has exploited this position – which contrasts sharply IS' brazen unilateralism – to build a formidable stronghold in the northwestern governorate of Idlib, bordering Turkey. Now home to the majority of the so-called 'Khorasan Group' and countless other senior veteran al-Qaida commanders dispatched from Af-Pak, Yemen, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Idlib will likely become a hub of transnationally minded jihadist militancy for years to come. In Yemen meanwhile, the outbreak of civil conflict between Houthi fighters and forces supportive of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in 2015 has revealed a gaping power vacuum into which al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been able to step and re-expand. A significant escalation in AQAP-related violence and international plots can therefore be expected in the coming months and into 2016.

Combating terrorist organizations is an intricately complex task, requiring a credible and united multinational effort that incorporates multi-disciplinary action within politics, diplomacy, society, religion, economics, development, military affairs and many other such areas. While a group like IS, which represents a qualitative step beyond a mere 'terrorist organization,' is militant at its core, it is reliant above all else upon societal and political instability, which can generally only be solved through a constructive engagement with those root causes. Naturally, this requires a parallel military component that aims to strategically weaken the organization on the ground, but this must be directed and led by local Sunni actors, backed up if necessary by external powers.

IS is arguably the most potently powerful and capable terrorist organization the world has faced in modern times, but its strategic thinking is comprehensible and its weaknesses are clear. Only by grasping the true nature of these fundamental issues can we begin to think about more practically implementing a blueprint to 'degrade and destroy.'

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## Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West

by Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser

### *Abstract*

*How much of a terrorist threat does the Islamic State (IS) pose to Western countries? This article looks at what IS has said and done with regard to attacks in the West. We examine IS statements and take stock of IS-related attack plots in Western Europe, North America, and Australia from January 2011 through June 2015 using a new dataset of jihadi plots and a new typology of links between organizations and attackers. IS appears to have had a decentralized attack strategy based on encouraging sympathiser attacks while not mounting centrally directed operations of their own. There have also been more plots involving only IS sympathisers than plots involving returned foreign fighters. However, the organization's formidable resources and verbal hints at future attacks give reason for vigilance.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, ISIS, strategy, transnationalism, incident data

### *Introduction*

How much of a terrorist threat does the Islamic State (IS) pose to Western countries? The group's spectacular growth and anti-Western rhetoric have raised fears that it might carry out major attacks in Europe, North America, or Australia. The question has implications for Western military strategy against IS, because the higher the transnational threat, the larger the incentive to dismantle the group – as opposed to containing it.

This article aims to bring the debate forward through quantification and specification. It makes two main contributions: The first is to take stock of IS-related operations in the West using a new dataset on jihadi plots from early 2011 to mid-2015. The second is to present a typology that disaggregates the notion of "IS-linked plot" and allows for more fine-grained measurement of regional group involvement in international operations.

Our data suggest that IS so far has had a decentralized attack strategy based on encouraging followers to attack while not mounting many leadership-directed plots. That strategy has produced a substantial number of "sympathiser plots" since September 2014, to the point where IS sympathisers now outnumber returning foreign fighters as plot instigators. We do not make predictions about future changes in IS strategy, but the typology can be used by analysts to measure small variations in the group's commitment to international operations and potentially allow for early detection of strategic shifts.

The purpose of the article is to assess, based on open-source evidence of past declarations and activities, the extent to which IS has invested itself in a strategy of targeting the West. Our motivation is twofold. For one, policymakers naturally worry that IS will "go global" – that is, embark on a campaign of major attacks in the West – and there has been a great deal of speculation about whether and when they might do so.[1] For another, there is confusion about exactly what, however little, IS has done so far in terms of international operations. While most recognized IS specialists agree that the group's strategic priorities are local and that almost all of its resources go into operations in Syria and Iraq[2], many media reports have spoken of alleged "IS plots" or "IS-linked plots" in the West over the past year.[3] One recent headline, for example, blared "Islamic State planning sophisticated attacks on the West." [4] So what exactly has taken place? How many or how few plots are we talking about? What kinds? Is the rate of incidents increasing?

To answer these questions we did three things. First, we looked briefly at what IS has said about attacking in the West. We examined leader statements, *Dabiq* magazine, a collection of 200 audiovisual productions, and anecdotal statements by IS footsoldiers. Second, we tried to establish how many plots in the West had an IS connection of any kind. To do this we first built a dataset of attacks and attack plots in the West since January 2011 and then looked for reports of IS connections in each case. Third, we tried to assess the degree of involvement by IS as an organization in each alleged “IS-linked” plot. For this we developed a typology of six ideal types of links between regional organizations and international attackers, collected information about each alleged link, and coded each plot according to the link type observed. The many methodological challenges and limitations to each of the procedures are discussed at the beginning of each section below.

The scope of our inquiry is limited to specifying the degree of IS’s past involvement in terrorist activity in the West. We are not seeking to predict whether IS will go more global in the future, much less whether IS could ever carry out a major attack in the West. We believe our data can help *inform* such debates, but the past can only tell us so much about the future. Empirically, we focus on the period from January 2011 through June 2015, and our main concern is the central Islamic State organization and its predecessors (but not its affiliates or “provinces” [*wilayat*] in places like Libya or Sinai).[5] By “West” we mean Western Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand.

The article has three parts. We look first at declared intentions, then at the number of IS-related plots, and then at the nature of IS’s connection to those plots.

### ***Declared intentions***

It is not easy to summarize what IS has said about attacking the West, because the group does not speak with one voice, and the number of statements that can be attributed to IS in one way or other is enormous. We chose to compile and manually examine four document samples: 1) English translations of all the statements by IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and top spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani between 1 July 2014 and 30 June 2015 (nine statements, about 50 pages of transcribed text)[6]; 2) Issues 1-9 of the English-language *Dabiq* magazine (about 500 pages)[7], 3) all the approximately 210 videos and photo montages published on the (now defunct) blog <https://addawlah.wordpress.com> between 30 July 2014 and 30 January 2015[8], and 4) a collection of anecdotal statements by IS footsoldiers on Twitter and in media interviews.

We chose these particular document types because they were presumably produced by different strata of the organization, namely, the top leadership (sample 1), upper cadres (samples 2 and 3) and lower ranks (sample 4). We sampled primarily the period after the declaration of the caliphate on 30 June 2014, because that was when the organization took its current form. The samples cover slightly different time periods for reasons to do with availability, but all of them cover the autumn of 2014, which is when we should expect to see the most anti-Western rhetoric (this was when the international military campaign against IS escalated). Our methodology is obviously limited by the fact that we only deal with samples and conduct qualitative content analysis. The ideal way to approach this topic would be to combine qualitative analysis of key texts with quantitative or automated content analysis of IS’s entire ideological corpus. We did not do it here, because this article’s main concern is IS’s plotting activity. Our approach should still reveal the broad features of IS’s declared intentions vis-a-vis the West.

*Footsoldiers*

To start at the bottom: Several IS footsoldiers have issued very explicit threats to the West. For example, in early 2014 a group of IS-affiliated Britons in Syria posted a series of memes (pictures with captions) threatening attacks in the UK and US.[9] In April 2014, a Canadian IS member appeared in a video saying “This is a message to Canada and all the American tyrants: We are coming and we will destroy you.”[10] In mid-June 2014, a video showed a British IS member saying the black flag would fly over Downing Street and another saying he would embark on a “killing spree” against non-Muslims if he ever returned home.[11] This was before the escalation, in August 2014, of the US-led anti-IS air campaign in Iraq and Syria, and since then such statements have proliferated. This, of course, is anecdotal evidence and we don’t know the proportion of IS fighters who harbor such views, but hundreds of individuals – probably more – demonstrably do. That said, most of these threats are chronologically and tactically unspecified and probably reflect a general intention to harm rather than immediate and concrete plans.

*Videos*

The video collection contains five productions whose main message is a threat to America.[12] In addition, one video praises the January 2015 Paris attacks, and three threaten Japan. Hostile statements almost certainly appear in other videos too, but these were the productions whose main purpose was to issue a threat. Three things are worth noting about the five videos addressed to the US. First, the threats are presented as a form of retaliation and made conditional on America’s future involvement in the Iraqi-Syrian theatre. Second, most of the videos appeared in the autumn of 2014, shortly after the escalation of US-led airstrikes. Third, the videos make up a very small proportion – about one percent – of the collection as a whole. The vast majority of items are devoted to local affairs such as battle exploits and various aspects of rebel governance.

*Dabiq magazine*

*Dabiq* magazine contains several calls for attacks and promises of conquest in the West. The most explicit appears in issue 4 (published in mid-October 2014), where one article says, “at this point of the crusade against the Islamic State, it is very important that attacks take place in every country that has entered into the alliance against the Islamic State, especially the US, UK, France, Australia, and Germany.”[13] That same issue also cites, in three different places, a passage from a statement by al-Adnani which includes the phrase “We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women.” Issues 7, 8 and 9 also include praise for recent attacks in the West and portraits of several of the perpetrators, who are described as IS-affiliated. Issue 9 also eulogizes “the shuhadā’ of the Islamic State including Numan Haider and Man Haron Monis (Australia), Michael Zehaf-Bibeau and Martin Couture-Rouleau (Canada) Zale Thompson, Elton Simpson, and Nadir Soofi (America), Amedy Coulibaly (France), Omar Abdel Hamid el-Hussein (Denmark), and Sofiane Amghar and Khalid Ben Larbi (Belgium).”[14]

However, several mitigating points are worth noting here. First, the call for attacks is exactly that: a call, addressed to sympathisers out there, not a commitment of the organization’s resources to future attacks. Second, in issue 9 the call is qualified as the second best course of action after leaving the West for the Caliphate: “Either one performs hijrah to the wilāyāt of the Khilāfah or, *if he is unable to do so, he must attack the crusaders*” [our emphasis].[15] Third, al-Adnani’s promise to conquer Rome is qualified a few sentences down as a long-term strategic milestone: “If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren

will reach it.”[16] Fourth, as with the video collection, threats to the West make up a very small proportion of the content of *Dabiq* magazine, and they receive less column space than the threats to IS’s local enemies.

### *Al-Baghdadi and al-Adnani*

It is in the statements by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, IS’s lead spokesman, that we find the most significant verbal threats to the West. On 22 September 2014 he issued a landmark call for attacks in the West:

*“If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone’s advice and do not seek anyone’s verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling.”[17]*

In January 2015 he repeated the call, adding an ominous phrase that hints at the possibility of centrally directed plots: “what lies ahead will be worse – with Allah’s permission – and more bitter, *for you haven’t seen anything from us just yet*” [our emphasis].[18] Then in March 2015, al-Adnani said, “know that we want Paris – by Allah’s permission – before Rome and before Spain, after we blacken your lives and destroy the White House, the Big Ben, and the Eifel Tower.”[19] These last two statements represent the strongest indication of the possibility of centrally directed IS attacks in the West that we have found in their ideological corpus so far. While we should take them extremely seriously, they are not unequivocal promises of impending terrorist attacks, for they might also be interpreted as a promise of a strategic conquest of the West that will materialize many years down the line.

What about the “caliph” himself? Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s five statements since July 2014 contain fewer explicit threats to the West than al-Adnani’s. Al-Baghdadi mentions the West relatively rarely, and when he does, it is mostly in general terms that declare it as an enemy or warn it of defeat. For example, on 1 July 2014, he said:

*“the world today has been divided into two camps ... the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the jews.”[20]*

And in November 2014, he said:

*“indeed the Crusaders will be defeated. By Allah’s permission, they will be defeated. And indeed the Muslims will be victorious. By Allah’s promise, they will be victorious. And the march of the mujahidin will continue until they reach Rome, by Allah’s permission.”[21]*

Al-Baghdadi’s most explicit reference to attacks in the West is a brief repetition, in his May 2015 statement, of the call for sympathiser attacks: “we call upon every Muslim in every place to perform hijrah to the Islamic State or fight in his land wherever that may be.”[22]

What is significant here are all the things the top IS leader is *not* saying. He is not saying anything that commits the organization to attacks in the West in the short term. He is not providing a carefully constructed set of arguments for why attacks in the West are warranted. And he has not devoted entire statements to addressing America.

All of this Usama bin Ladin did repeatedly before and after 9/11. In 1998, for example, Bin Ladin said,



*“We have formed with a large number of our brothers the Global Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders ... the work of many of those brothers is going well ... we pray to God that He will open the way for them to wreak revenge on the Jews and the Americans. ... Some countries... have ordered us to stop attacking America, but we believe these attacks are a duty incumbent upon us.”[23]*

In October 2001 Bin Ladin said “I swear by God ... that neither America nor anyone who lives there will enjoy safety” (7 Oct 2001), and in a 2004 message addressed to the American people, he said “we have been fighting you ... Just as you violate our security, so we violate yours” (29 Oct 2004).[24] These are but snippets from al-Qaida’s long history of promises to attack America.

All of this suggests that, while IS leaders view the West as an eternal enemy and applaud mass-casualty attacks there, they do not seem quite as hell-bent on carrying out attacks on the West as their counterparts in al-Qaida Central. The content, tone, and quantity of IS’s anti-Western rhetoric suggest, thus far, a certain reluctance to commit the organization fully to a terrorism campaign in the West.

At the same time, the group is calling loudly for sympathiser attacks, and there is conceivably a whole spectrum of low-commitment forms of assistance that IS could provide to interested attackers. Besides, an organization this size is bound to suffer from principal-agent problems, in the form of mid-level cadres or footsoldiers taking initiatives that stray from the strategy of the top leaders. There is, in other words, every reason to expect attacks in the West that are linked to IS in some way. As we shall see, there have been several.

### ***The number and features of IS-connected plots***

To identify the number of IS-related plots and gauge the relative scale of that phenomenon, we built a dataset of jihadi attacks and serious alleged attack plots in the West from January 2011 through June 2015 and searched for information about any IS connections to those plots. The dataset is an extension of Thomas Hegghammer’s *Jihadi Plots in the West* dataset (which covered the period 1990-2010) and used the same basic data collection procedure.[25] We collected news reports and other open sources on attacks and plot investigations, generating first a long list of incidents. We included foiled and aborted plots because we wanted to capture the “gross plot production” and not just the net number of attacks that happen to avoid police detection. We then sifted the cases to include only what we call “serious plots”, that is, alleged plots which 1) are cited in more than one media report, 2) involve intent to inflict serious physical harm on people, 3) involve one or more identifiable perpetrators with radical Islamist motivations, 4) were due to occur on Western soil, and 5) contain some evidence of weapons possession and a reasonably defined target. We excluded several plots whose features either conflicted with these criteria or could not be established from the available information.[26]

Next, we sought to identify the core plotters in each case and to compile information about their background, motivations, and connections to militant networks. We then coded the plots for a number of variables (see appended dataset linked at the end of this article), including presence of returnee foreign fighters and presence of an IS connection. An IS connection could be anything from the perpetrators having expressed sympathy with IS to them having received instructions from the top IS leadership.

### ***Limitations***

There are several potential sources of inaccuracies in our data. One is that we work only with open-source information, so we may have missed some plots altogether, excluded some plots that were more serious

than reported in the press, or included others that were less serious than reported. We believe the number of significant plots we missed altogether is small, because in Western democracies, terrorist plots should enter the legal system, because the media is hungry for information about terrorism, and because intelligence services have an incentive to reveal serious foiled plots (since it demonstrates effectiveness and/or helps justify increased funding or changes in legislation). We realize that many counterterrorism operations go unreported, but we suspect that this happens most often when suspected plans are foiled at such an early stage that there is insufficient evidence to prosecute, in which case nobody can really know whether the plot would have come to fruition. That said, it is important to realize that security services routinely carry out disruptive operations – often in the form of arrests on charges “lesser” than domestic terrorism, such as fundraising, recruiting, or foreign fighting – which may serve to prevent some potential plots from developing.

Another source of error is that we are dealing with recent incidents, several of which have not been tried in court or been completely investigated yet. We know from experience that the complete picture of a given case often does not emerge until several years after the attack or arrests occurred. The media’s initial description of a given plot can sometimes differ from the final, corroborated version of events.[27] Our coding of IS connections and of the presence of foreign fighters is particularly vulnerable to this problem. To complicate matters, there are biases cutting both ways: on the one hand, the difficulty of establishing a plotter’s communications or travel history can lead to underreporting of IS connections or foreign fighter involvement. On the other hand, the general fear of IS plots and foreign fighters can lead to overreporting as analysts and journalists lean to the more “interesting” interpretation of ambiguous data. We do not know the net effect of these biases; we can only report what the currently available open sources tell us.

A final point to bear in mind is the extensive use of so-called “sting operations” in terrorism investigations in the United States, which we suspect contribute to a certain overreporting of plots there. According to our count, between 11 and 14 of the 25 plots in the United States in this period involved undercover operatives, compared to zero in the European and Australian plots. In many of these cases, the undercover operatives provided the means (in the form of a fake weapon), though not necessarily the intention, for the suspects to reach the advanced stage of preparation that allowed for arrest and prosecution. Entrapment debates aside, it is reasonable to assume that a few of those plots would not have reached a similarly advanced preparation stage without the interference of an undercover operative. We therefore believe that certain types of “proto-plots” that would fizzle out and not get reported in Europe appear as plots in the US data. We do not, however, purport to know how large this effect is.

### *Overall findings*

For this four and a half-year period, we identified a total of 69 plots; 37 in Europe, 25 in North America, and seven in Australia. Of these, 19 (28 %) came to execution; 12 in Europe, five in North America and two in Australia. The total number of plotters involved was about 120 (over 80 for Europe, over 30 in North America and nine in Australia).

We found reports of an IS connection in 30 of the 69 plots. Most of the IS-connected plots occurred in the last 12 months (from July 2014 through June 2015); of a total of 33 plots in this period, 26 (79 %) had an IS connection. As we shall see below, however, the connection in most cases consists of declared support for IS, not meetings or communications with IS cadres. In any case, these numbers suggest that Islamic State has surpassed al-Qaida as the main provider of inspiration for plots in the West.



It is worth noting here that the distinction between IS-linked plots and al-Qaida-linked plots is not always clear. Several plotters appear to have been influenced by both IS and al-Qaida, consuming propaganda from, and expressing support for, both groups. Some were long-standing al-Qaida supporters who only became infatuated with IS a short while before the plot. And in Paris in January 2015, the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly even coordinated their respective operations, one in the name of al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the other in the name of IS.[28] The al-Qaida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and IS may be fighting it out in Syria, but in the West many radicals do not seem to think they need to choose sides.

Of the 30 IS-connected plots, 11 (37%) came to execution, which is higher than the rate for non-IS-connected plots (21%). We suspect that this difference reflects the fact that many of the IS-connected plots were small (involving one or two individuals) and low-tech (using stabbings and handguns), making them more difficult to prevent. This is also reflected in the damage they caused: executed IS-connected attacks caused an average of 1.4 deaths compared to 2.9 deaths for executed non-IS-connected attacks (1.7 without the Kouachi brothers attack).

### *Role of foreign fighters*

We can also use the data to examine the role of foreign fighters in Western plots. There has been much concern about a possible terrorism “blowback” from the participation of around 4,000 Western (mostly European) Muslims in the Syria war.[29] We find that 16 of the 69 plots involved at least one foreign fighter.[30] All but one of them occurred in Europe. Of these 16 plots, nine involved foreign fighters (11 individuals) who had been to Syria (the remaining seven plots had links to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen).[31] Of these nine Syria-linked foreign fighter plots, six included people (eight individuals) who had trained with IS.[32] Of the other three plots, two were linked to Jabhat al-Nusra and one to an unspecified group. Our data thus suggest that the blowback rate – the proportion of outgoing fighters who return and plot attacks against their home country or region – from Syria is thus far very low indeed: 11 plotting returnees from an outgoing contingent of around 4,000 makes for a blowback rate in the order of 1 in 360. Even if our underreporting is very significant – let us say we have missed two thirds of the cases and the real number of plotting Syria returnees is around 30 – the blowback rate is still lower than one in a hundred. It is likely that this rate will increase over time, though not immediately, because the number of outgoing foreign fighters is currently also growing, mathematically offsetting the effect of new plots. Only after the flow of foreign fighters decreases significantly are we likely to see an increase in the blowback rate.

Our count of Syria-related foreign fighter plots is of course strikingly low compared with the blowback anticipated by some analysts and policymakers in recent years. A full discussion of the reasons for the low blowback (thus far) is beyond the scope of this article, but a good start is offered by Daniel Byman, who in a recent article listed six “off-ramps on the road to terrorism” for foreign fighters, namely, 1) death, 2) moving to another conflict, 3) disillusionment, 4) disinterest in attacking the West, 5) lack of attack instructions, and 6) incompetence.[33]

Let us add three additional observations to help make sense of the numbers. The first is that a blowback rate of one in hundreds is by no means uncommon. Several other foreign fighter destinations in the past, such as Somalia or Iraq in the 2000s, had blowback rates in the same order of magnitude; it was Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1990s and 2000s that pulled up the historical average.[34] As Hegghammer has argued elsewhere, it is primarily those destinations in which there is a group with a concerted strategy of targeting the West that have high blowback rates.[35]

Second, it has long been much easier to go to Syria than to most previous foreign fighter destinations. [36] This has not only led to very high numbers of people going, but also to less selection for ideological commitment than was the case for previous destinations. This has probably led to the foreign fighters in Syria being, as a group, more diverse and less radicalized at the point of departure than those who headed to, say, Waziristan in the 2000s.

Third, the very anticipation of a high foreign fighter blowback from Syria probably triggered more preemptive arrests of Syria returnees than for returnees from previous conflicts, which, in turn, may have decreased the number of foreign fighter plots. Since 2013, tens if not hundreds of returning foreign fighters have been arrested and charged with crimes related to their activities in Syria or with other offences “lesser” than domestic terrorism. It is reasonable to assume that a few of these detained returnees might one day have gone on to plot in their home countries had they not been arrested. Bear in mind that only some returnees were charged on their return (only France appears to have had an “arrest them all” policy), and that the selection of whom to arrest was probably informed in part by intelligence assessments of the returnees’ degree of radicalization. In other words, several of the returnees considered most dangerous were “taken off the street” before they were in a position to plot attacks. It is impossible to say how many plots might have been preempted by such arrests, and it is even harder to say whether the plot reduction effect is permanent, given that many of the returnees convicted on foreign fighter crimes will receive relatively short sentences.

Of the nine Syria-linked foreign fighter plots, only one came to execution, namely, the May 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels by Mehdi Nemmouche, who trained with IS. Of the seven non-Syria-related foreign fighter plots, two came to execution: the Merah attacks in March 2012 and the Kouachi brothers’ attack on Charlie Hebdo in January 2015. The execution rate for foreign fighter plots generally is lower (19 %) than for plots without foreign fighters (31 %), which is interesting because it was the other way around in the 1990-2010 period.[37] This may be because intelligence services have tracked foreign fighters particularly closely in recent years and may therefore have become better at detecting their plots. However, the executed foreign fighter plots in our dataset were far more deadly on average (7.3 deaths per attack) than the executed plots without foreign fighters (1.2 deaths per attack).

However, other than indicating that IS has exerted a significant influence on jihadi plotters in the West, especially in the past year, these data do not tell us very much about the commitment of IS as an organization to attacking the West. For this we need to look more closely at what “IS-connected” really means.

### *The nature of the IS connection*

The problem with terms such as “IS-connected”, “-related” or “-linked” is that they can misrepresent the degree to which IS as an organization is implicated. Fifteen years of al-Qaida-influenced terrorism in Europe have taught us that the patterns of interaction between flagship terrorist organizations in the “East” and militants in the West can be very complex indeed. By the mid-2000s, it was clear to most observers that 9/11-style missions, in which the top al-Qaida leadership grooms an attack team and sends it to the West, were rare, and that many plots involved people with a more remote connection to al-Qaida cadres. This led analysts to introduce the distinction between “top-down”- and “bottom-up”-instigated al-Qaida plots, which has long been the dominant way of parsing jihadism in the West. However, as the bitter and inconclusive polemic between Bruce Hoffman and Marc Sageman indicates, this dichotomy is arguably not very fruitful. [38] Many plots were neither clearly top-down nor clearly bottom up, and the lack of a consensus on observable coding criteria led different analysts to interpret the same plot differently. We will have the same

problem if we apply a dichotomous categorization framework to what is clearly a *spectrum* of link types between IS and those who plot in its name.

### *Link typology*

We therefore propose a new link typology that better reflects the spectrum of link types and has more easily observable coding criteria. We developed it inductively by examining al-Qaida-related plots in Europe in the 2000s and identifying the most common distinct types of links between leaders and attackers. We ended up with six different link types representing points on a spectrum ranging from very low to very high leadership involvement. Each type is associated with a specific kind of interaction that is in principle observable, such as electronic communication or training. The typology assumes a hierarchy of interactions, in which some reflect a stronger leader-attacker connection than others. For example, we assume that training camp attendance produces a closer connection than electronic communication, and that instruction from top leaders is more significant than instruction from mid-level cadres. This need not always be the case, but we think it is in most situations.

The six link types are as follows:

1. *Training and top-level directives.* The attacker[39] trains in the organization's heartland, is tasked by top leaders to attack in the West, and is supported materially by the organization in the planning and preparation process. The classic historical example is the 9/11 attack.
2. *Training and mid-level directives.* The attacker trains in the organization's heartland and is encouraged by mid-level cadres to carry out a more or less specified attack in the West, but has little or no interaction with the top leadership and receives little or no material support from the organization. Examples from al-Qaida's history include the various plots by the Abu Doha network in the early 2000s or the Mohammed Merah attack in 2012.
3. *Training.* The attacker trains in the organization's heartland, but is not specifically instructed by anyone to attack in the West. Instead, he develops the motivation to attack in the West himself, in the belief that he is doing what the organization wants. A historical example is Mohammed Geele, who trained with al-Shabaab in Somalia, returned to Denmark, and tried to assassinate the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard in 2010.
4. *Remote contact with directives.* The attacker communicates remotely (typically by telephone, email, or social media) and bilaterally with cadres of the organization and receives personal instructions to attack in the West. A good example from al-Qaida history is Rajib Karim, who in 2010 was instructed by Anwar al-Awlaki via encrypted email to attack airline targets in the UK.
5. *Remote contact without directives.* The attacker communicates remotely and bilaterally with members of the organization, but does not receive instructions to attack in the West. An example would be Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hassan, who exchanged emails with Anwar al-Awlaki without discussing operations.
6. *Sympathy, no contact.* The attacker expresses ideological support for the group through his propaganda consumption, written or spoken statements, or some other aspect of his behavior, but does not communicate bilaterally with anyone in the organization. One example is Roshonara Choudhry, who stabbed a British MP in 2010, having been inspired by al-Awlaki's online lectures.

Plots should be classified according to the “highest” level of leader-attacker interaction observed in the data at hand, and they should only be assigned one value, for a high-level interaction usually also includes the lower ones.

The idea here is that by classifying plots according to link type, we can gain a more fine-grained understanding of a given organization’s involvement in external operations, and we can track minor variations in that involvement over time. We use it here to study IS, but in principle it can be applied to any organization with an international footprint.

If a six-pronged typology offers too much resolution for one’s analytical purposes, it is possible to group the types into larger categories. For example, one might refer to plot types 1-4 as “high-involvement plots” – because the organization is “involved” in the plot through training and/or directives – and plot types 5-6 “low-involvement” plots because there is no training or directive. We apply this simplified typology toward the end of the article.

### *Coding IS plots*

To better understand IS’s involvement in international operations, we coded all the 30 IS-related plots in our dataset according to this typology. For data we used open sources, mostly newspaper reports and legal documents, so all the reliability caveats mentioned earlier apply here too, with a vengeance. Coding for interaction type requires very detailed information, which is scarce – and probably often inaccurate – in open sources. We suspect that many of our coding decisions will have to be revised as more and better information about each case emerges. Still, we believe there is some value in trying our best with the available data, if only to illustrate how the typology can be operationalized.

We believe that the error margin is larger on the upside than on the downside—that is, we think it is more likely that our coding decisions will need to be changed to higher-level link type values than to lower-level ones. One reason is that more details are likely to emerge over time. The other reason is that we coded conservatively, assigning values only based on explicit references to particular interaction types in the sources, even when the circumstantial evidence pointed to another, higher interaction type. For example, in the Creteil plot, media reported that Mohamed Ouaharani, after returning from training with IS in Syria, contacted an IS member in Syria saying he was “ready to work”. We coded this as type 3 (training only) because we do not know for sure whether the IS member responded with directives or whether Ouaharani simply signaled his availability.

### *Findings*

The first basic finding is that the IS-connected plots do indeed represent a spectrum of different link types. We identified IS links of all types except type 1 (training and top-level directives). To illustrate what these link types look like in practice, we provide five brief sample descriptions below. Descriptions of all plots are included in appendix 1 (see link at the end of this article).

- *Type 2: The Verviers Plot.* On 15 January 2015 Belgian police conducted a series of raids in and around the town of Verviers, killing two in a shootout and arresting thirteen. In the apartment of the main suspects, police found bomb-making material, automatic rifles, and police uniforms, which authorities believe were to be used in attacks on police targets. Several of the suspects had recently returned from Syria, where they had trained with IS. After their return they had allegedly communicated, by cellphone and in code, with a Greece- or Syria-based IS member named

Abelhamid Abaaoud (of Moroccan-Belgian origin), who investigators believe acted as a middleman between the plotters and IS cadres in Syria. Another suspected middleman between the Belgian cell and IS, an Algerian, was captured in Greece and extradited to Belgium.[40]

- *Type 3: The Brussels Museum shooting.* On 24 May 2014, the French-Algerian Mehdi Nemmouche shot and killed four people with a Kalashnikov at the entrance of the Jewish Museum in Brussels. Nemmouche, who was later captured in France carrying the assault weapon wrapped in a black ISIS flag, had recently returned from Syria, where he allegedly had been part of an ISIS hostage handling unit. Nemmouche was allegedly inspired by Mohammed Merah's attacks in Southern France and reportedly wanted to outdo him. No evidence has emerged suggesting Nemmouche was taking orders from anyone in Syria.[41]
- *Type 4: The Vienna plot.* In October 2014, Austrian authorities arrested a 14-year old Austrian-Turkish boy whom they accused – and later convicted – of planning to bomb Vienna's Westbahnhof train station. The boy, identified as "Mertkan G.", had reportedly interacted online with IS members in Syria who had promised him USD 25,000 and a special position within IS if he carried out an attack in Austria. According to Austrian police, he subsequently made "concrete enquiries about buying ingredients" for a bomb similar to the one used in the Boston Marathon attack.[42]
- *Type 5: Ceuta plot.* On 10 March 2015 Spanish authorities announced the arrest, in the North African Spanish enclave of Ceuta, of two individuals accused of plotting attacks in Spain or in neighboring countries. The suspects were Spaniards of Moroccan origin who had been arrested two months previously possessing guns, munitions, knives, and military uniforms. Authorities said the suspects had been in contact with IS online, but media reports included no indications that the suspects had received instructions.[43]
- *Type 6: The Copenhagen attack.* On 14 February 2015, Danish-Palestinian Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein went on a shooting spree, killing two and injuring five. He first attacked a speaking venue hosting the Swedish artist Lars Vilks (known for his caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad) and then attacked security guards outside a synagogue. El-Hussain appears to have been radicalized in prison less than a year before the attack, and he had been released just two weeks prior to the operation. In those two weeks he expressed support for IS on social media, and he declared allegiance to IS on his Facebook page hours before the attack. No evidence has emerged suggesting he had communicated with an IS member, but he reportedly did share a prison cell with another IS sympathiser at one point. [44]

A second, more significant finding is that the majority of IS-related plots belong in the lower end of the spectrum of organizational involvement (see Table 1). We found no plots of type 1 (training and top-level directives), and only two cases of type 2 (training and mid-level directives). By contrast, we found 17 cases of type 6 (no contact whatsoever) and five of type 5 (remote contact without directives). If we group plot types into high and low-involvement plots as described earlier, then our data suggest low-involvement IS plots outnumber high-involvement ones by a factor of almost three to one (22 vs 8).

Type	Frequency	Case names
1 – Training and top-level directives	0	
2 – Training and mid-level directives	2	“London Mumbai plot”, Verviers plot
3 – Training	4	Riviera plot, Brussels museum shooting, Creteil plot, Surgeon plot
4 – Remote contact with directives	2	Baryalei-Azari plot, Vienna plot
5 – Remote contact, no directives	5	Cannes-Torcy attack, Remembrance Day plot, Ceuta plot, Catalonia plot, Garland attack
6 – Sympathy, no contact	17	Brisbane plot, Melbourne stabbing, Quebec car attack, NYC Axe attack, Sydney hostage taking, Tours knife attack, Coulibaly attack, Cornell Capitol plot, Copenhagen attack, Fairfield plot, Anzac Day plot, Velentzas/Siddiqui plot, Fort Riley plot, Greenvale plot; Lyon gas factory attack, Usaamah Rahim plot, NYC aeronautics student plot

Table 1: IS-linked plots, by link type

A third finding is that we see no clear upward or downward trend in the evolution of high-involvement plots (see Figure 1). In other words, our data do not suggest that IS has been investing itself more in external operations over the past year.



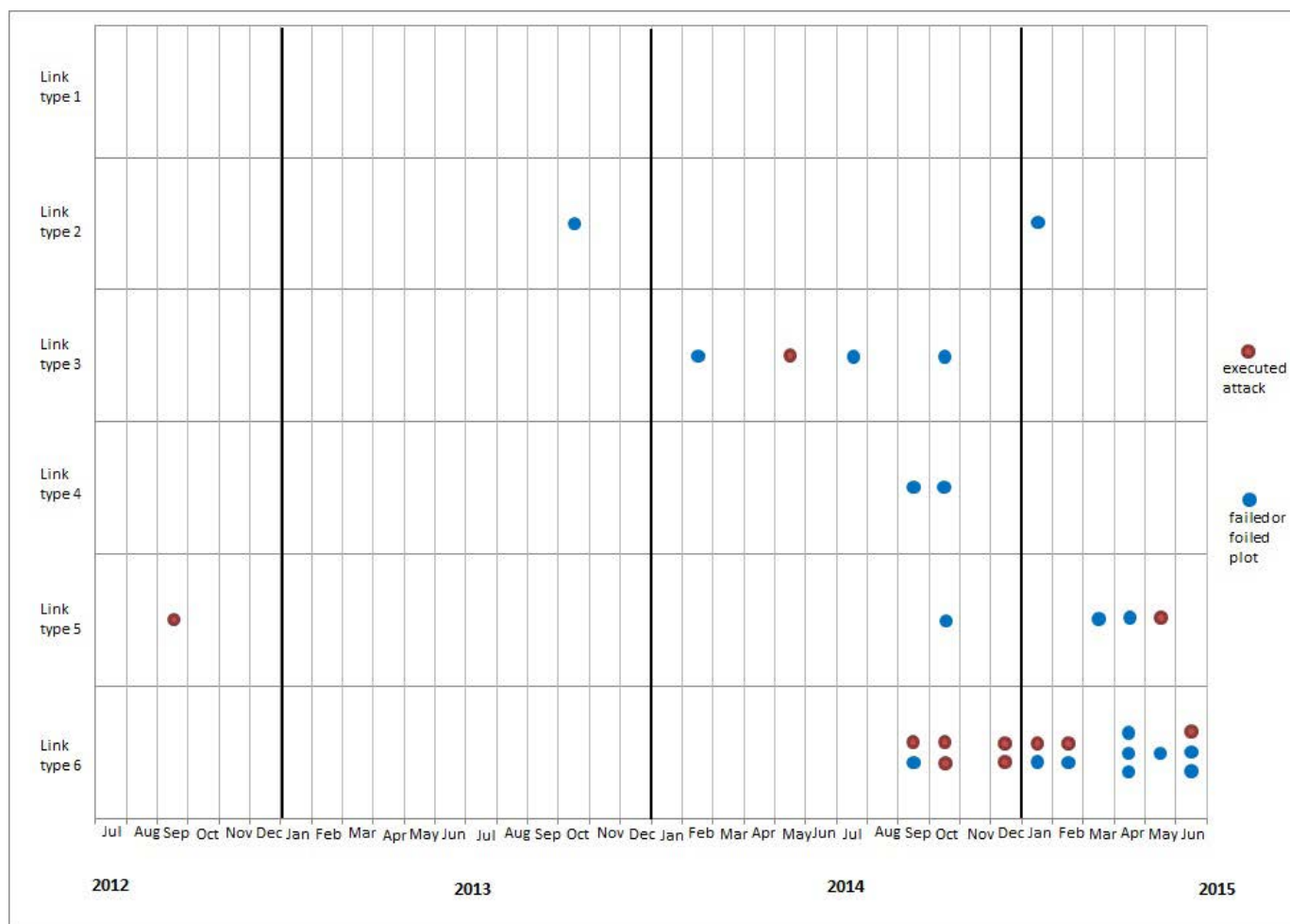


Figure 1: Chronological distribution of IS-linked plots in the West, by link type

A fourth finding, clearly illustrated by Figure 1, is that the number of “low-involvement plots” (or sympathiser attacks) has increased significantly in recent months. After two years with zero such plots, we had 21 in the last ten months of our timeframe (September 2014–June 2015). The cut-off date seems to be September 2014, which is exactly when IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani issued the first call for sympathiser attacks in the West. The trend is so striking that we strongly suspect al-Adnani’s call contributed to the increase.

A final observation is that some lower-level IS cadres in Syria have been trying to remotely recruit operatives for attacks in the West. In addition to the two “type 4” plots in our dataset, there have been several reports of Western foreign fighters in Syria trying to persuade followers back home to attack. A recent undercover investigation by the British tabloid *the Sun* documented one such attempt in considerable detail.[45] A journalist posing as a radical Islamist in Britain allegedly entered into contact online with a Syria-based British foreign fighter named Junaid Hussain, who reportedly proceeded to offer detailed operational instructions for a pressure-cooker bomb plot on an Armed Forces Day parade in London in June 2015. It is not clear whether this type of lower-rank plot generation is indicative of a deliberate strategy of plausible deniability by the IS leadership or a principal-agent problem caused by the overzealousness of lower cadres. In any event, it illustrates the highly complex relationship between IS as an organization and those who operate in its name.



### *Conclusion*

This brief analysis suggests that Islamic State does not currently pose the same type of terrorist threat to the West as al-Qaida did in the 2000s. IS has not yet “gone global” in the sense of having committed a substantial proportion of its resources to out-of-area operations. Instead, it has assumed a profoundly ambiguous, hard-to-read posture toward terrorism in the West. In words, its leaders have promised to conquer Rome and called on supporters to carry out international terrorist attacks, but the same leaders have not explicitly promised to devote their organization to major operations in the near future. In deeds, the lower echelons of the organization have been implicated in several plots, but the top leadership appears not yet to have groomed attack teams for major operations in the US or Europe the way Usama Bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri did. Why they have not done so is a question for further research, but we suspect it has to do with the group’s local state-building ambitions.

At the same time, however, IS appears to have succeeded more than al-Qaida in triggering so-called “individual jihad” operations by unaffiliated sympathisers in the West. Al-Qaida tried to do this in the early 2010s through *Inspire* magazine and other messages, but the call was only seriously heeded by a limited number of people. By contrast, IS has thus far inspired an average of two sympathiser attacks per month since al-Adnani’s call for individual jihad was issued in September 2014. The difference in the reception of the two calls for individual jihad is illustrated by the case of Australia, where there were no al-Qaida linked sympathiser plots in the 2010-2013 period, but seven IS-linked ones between September 2014 and May 2015. There may of course also be a cumulative effect at play, by which IS is profiting from the ideological groundwork laid by *Inspire* magazine.

In any case, IS sympathiser plots represent a formidable challenge to Western security agencies. So far, there have been over twice as many IS sympathiser plots (22) as plots involving foreign fighters who returned from Syria (9). IS sympathiser plots admittedly tend to be small in scale, but they have an execution rate of almost 50% (10 of 22) compared to around 20% for other plots in the same period. The implication for counterterrorism professionals is clear: worry not only about the foreign fighters, but also about IS sympathisers who never made it to Syria.

The big question, of course, is whether the IS leadership might change strategy and start mounting major operations in addition to the smaller ones it is already inspiring. We hesitate to make predictions here, because the strategic decision to go global lies in the hands of a small number of individuals with strong ideological convictions. We will suggest, however, that the only thing Western governments can do to influence that decision is to appeal to the leadership’s rational side and make it abundantly clear that going global will cost the organization dearly.

Still, deterrence may not be enough, so Western governments should make strategic plans for a scenario in which IS does go global. This means, among other things, keeping close track of IS support networks in the West and thinking carefully in advance about how to respond – politically, diplomatically, and militarily – to a major IS terrorist campaign. If it happens, it will be one of the most anticipated offensives in terrorist history, and we will have no excuse for being unprepared.

[Appendix 1: Case Descriptions of Jihadi Plots in the West, January 2011-June 2015 \(PDF\)](#)

[Appendix 2: Coded Data on Jihadi Plots in the West, January 2011-June 2015 \(Excel\)](#)

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## Notes

[1] See, for example, Robin Simcox, "ISIS' Western Ambitions," *Foreign Affairs*, 30 June 2014; Paul Cruickshank, "Could ISIS Retaliate against the West?" *CNN.com*, 9 August 2014; Daniel Benjamin, "Hawks Exaggerate ISIS Threat to the United States," *BostonGlobe.com*, 17 August 2014; Peter Bergen, "ISIS: Is It Really a Threat to the U.S.?" *CNN.com*, 20 August 2014; Raffaello Pantucci and Clare Ellis, "The Threat of ISIS to the UK," *RUSI Briefing Paper*, October 2014; Michael Flynn, James Livingston, and Michael Smith, "Retired Generals: Be Afraid of ISIS," *CNN.com*, 26 April 2015. The search string "will ISIS attack" yields over 4500 hits on Google.

[2] See, for example, Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015); Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2015); Charles Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State" (Doha: Brookings, December 2014); Cole Bunzel, "The Ideology of the Islamic State" (Washington, DC: Brookings, March 2015); Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015.

[3] See, for example, Bob Orr, "Australian authorities thwart ISIS-related terror plot," *CBSNews.com*, 14 September 2014; Robin de Peyer, "Three more arrested in London over 'Islamic State-linked terror plot'," *Evening Standard*, 13 October 2014; and "FBI investigating possible ISIS terror plot in the US", Reuters, 26 April 2015.

[4] J. J. Green, "Islamic State planning sophisticated attacks on the West", *WTOP.com*, 29 June 2015.

[5] The organization currently known as "Islamic State" had different names in the 2011-2014 period, which poses a slight problem for plot attribution. The group was known as "Islamic State in Iraq" (ISI) until early April 2013 when it took the name "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL), before it again changed names to "Islamic State" on 29 June 2014. We consider plots linked to ISI or ISIL prior to June 2014 as IS-related. Somewhat controversially, we also consider plots linked to the Syria-based group Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) between January 2012 and April 2013 as IS-related, because JN was originally established as a branch of ISI in early 2012 before it broke with ISIL in April 2013. However, this only affects one plot, namely, the September 2012 grenade attack on a Jewish bakery outside Paris by the JN-linked Cannes-Torcy network.

[6] These transcribed statements were collected from a variety of webpages, many of which are now defunct, but most statements can still be found elsewhere online through a simple Google search. We found 5 statements by al-Baghdadi in this period; they were released on or around 1 July 2014, 5 July 2014, 20 September 2014, 13 November 2014, and 14 May 2015 respectively. We found 4 statements by al-Adnani, released on or around 22 September 2014, 26 January 2015, 12 March 2015, and 23 July 2015. All of these statements were originally delivered in Arabic; 7 as audio recordings and 1 (al-Baghdadi's 5 July 2014 statement) as a video. The transcribed English translations appear to have been produced by IS itself. We checked the translations by comparing sample extracts and found them to be of high quality.

[7] An archive of *Dabiq* is available here: <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2015/04/24/the-islamic-state-an-archive-of-dabiq-magazine/>.

[8] The collection, of which we possess a copy, contains what we believe is the vast majority, though probably not the universe, of "official" audiovisual IS productions between 30 July 2014 and 30 January 2015.

[9] Stephen Wright, "Fanatics in Syria Vow to Bring Terror Home to UK," *Daily Mail*, 5 February 2014.

[10] Stuart Bell, "Syrian Extremists Threaten to 'destroy' Canada in Online Video," *National Post*, 14 April 2014.

[11] Dipesh Gadher, "We'll Fly Black Flag of Jihad over London," *Sunday Times*, 15 June 2014.

[12] The five anti-US productions are: "A Message To America" (23 August 2014), "A Letter in Blood to the Leaders of the Kurdish-American Alliance" (29 August 2014), "Message of the Mujahid Abu 'Umar Al-Ansari" (12 October 2014), "Wa In Udtum Udnaa" (26 October 2014); and "We Swear We Will Take Revenge" (27 January 2015). There were no productions explicitly aimed at Western countries other than the US.

[13] *Dabiq* 4, p. 44.

[14] *Dabiq* 9, pp. 54-55.

[15] *Dabiq* 9, p. 54.

[16] *Dabiq* 4, p. 5.

- [17] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful", 22 September 2014 (available at <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/09/25/abu-muhammad-al-adnani-ash-shami-indeed-your-lord-is-ever-watchful/>).
- [18] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "Say, 'die in your rage'", 26 January 2015 (available at <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2015/01/26/audio-statement-by-is-spokesman-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-as-shami-say-die-in-your-rage/>).
- [19] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "They kill and they are killed", 12 March 2015 (available at <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2015/03/13/so-they-kill-and-are-killed-audio-statement-by-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-as-shami/>).
- [20] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "A message to the mujahidin and the Islamic ummah in the month of Ramadan", 1 July 2014 (available at <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/07/01/islamic-state-message-to-the-mujahidin-and-the-islamic-ummah-in-the-month-of-ramadan/>).
- [21] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Even if the Disbelievers despise such", 13 November 2014 (available at <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/11/14/audio-message-by-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-even-if-the-disbelievers-despise-such/>).
- [22] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "March forth whether light or heavy", 14 May 2015 (available at <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2015/05/14/a-new-audio-message-by-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-march-forth-whether-light-or-heavy/>).
- [23] Bruce Lawrence, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 69 and 78.
- [24] *Ibid.*, pp. 105 and 238.
- [25] Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting" *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 1–15.
- [26] The most prominent excluded cases are listed in the Excel spreadsheet that accompanies this article (Appendix 2).
- [27] For example, the Madrid bombings in 2004 were long considered a "homegrown" operation because the initial investigation turned up little evidence of links to al-Qaida. Only several years later did it emerge that there was a link to al-Qaida central through Amer Azizi; see Fernando Reinares, "The Madrid Bombings and Global Jihadism," *Survival* 52 (2010): 83–104. Similarly, Mohammed Merah was initially described as a "lone wolf", until it emerged that he had trained in Afghanistan and met al-Qaida representatives there; see Virginie Andre and Shandon Harris-Hogan, "Mohamed Merah: From Petty Criminal to Neojihadist," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14, no. 2 (2013): 307–19.
- [28] Jason Hanna and Margot Haddad, "Report: Cherif Kouachi texted Coulibaly an hour before Paris attacks began," *CNN.com*, 17 February 2015.
- [29] "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s," *ICSR.info*, 26 January 2015 (available at <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>).
- [30] The plots with evidence of foreign fighter participation are the El-Kebir plot (Germany 2011), the Irfan Naseer plot (UK 2011), the Merah attacks (France 2012), the Luton cell (UK 2012), the Wootton Bassett plot (UK 2012), the Gibraltar plot (Spain 2012), the Lyes Darani plot (France 2013), the London "Mumbai" plot (UK 2013), the Riviera plot (France 2014), the Brussels Museum shooting (Belgium 2014), the June 2014 UK plot, the Creteil plot (France 2014), the Surgeon plot (UK 2014), the Kouachi brothers attack (France 2015), the Verviers plot (Belgium 2015), and the Mohamud plot (USA 2015). See appendix for details.
- [31] The plots with evidence of participation of foreign fighters who had been to Syria are the Lyes Darani plot, the London "Mumbai" plot, the Riviera plot, the Brussels Museum shooting, the June 2014 UK plot, the Creteil plot, the Surgeon plot, the Verviers plot, and the Mohamud plot. See appendix for details.
- [32] The plots with evidence of participation of foreign fighters who had trained with IS in Syria/Iraq are the London "Mumbai" plot, the Riviera plot, the Brussels Museum shooting, the Creteil plot, the Surgeon plot, and the Verviers plot. See appendix for details.
- [33] Daniel Byman, "The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 8 (2015): 581–602.
- [34] Thomas Hegghammer, "Foreign Fighters in Syria: A Danger to the West?" presentation to the Henry Jackson Society, London, 26 November 2013 (transcript available at <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2013/11/26/foreign-fighters-in-syria-a-danger-to-the-west/>).
- [35] *Ibid.* and Thomas Hegghammer, "Will ISIS 'weaponize' foreign fighters?" *CNN.com*, 17 October 2014.
- [36] Thomas Hegghammer, "Syria's foreign fighters," *Foreign Policy*, 9 December 2013.
- [37] Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"

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[38] See for example Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman, "Does Osama Still Call the Shots?" *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2008).

[39] We use the singular for simplicity; a plot may of course involve more than one attacker interacting with the organization.

[40] Paul Cruickshank, "Inside the ISIS Plot to Attack the Heart of Europe," *CNN.com*, 13 February 2015; "Belgian 'jihadi Leader' Remains Free despite Two Arrests in Greece," *The Guardian*, 18 January 2015.

[41] "France - Brussels Shooter 'planned Bastille Day Atrocity' in Paris," *France 24*, 8 September 2014; "Mehdi Nemmouche, de Roubaix Aux Basses Cœuvres Jihadistes," *Libération*, 26 July 2014.

[42] Justin Huggler, "Isil Jihadists 'Offered Teenager \$25,000 to Carry out Bombings in Vienna,'" *Daily Telegraph*, 30 October 2014.

[43] Dan Bilefsky, "Spain Says Arrested Pair Were Part of Terrorist Plot," *New York Times*, 10 March 2015.

[44] "Who Was Copenhagen Gunman Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein?" *CNN.com*, 27 February 2015 and "Afsløring: Omar El-Hussein havde 'cellefællesskab' med Islamisk Stat-støtte," *TV2*, 14 April 2015.

[45] "Islamic State monster aimed to kill British soldiers," *TheSun.co.uk*, 26 June 2015.

## Understanding Jihadi Proto-States

by Brynjar Lia

### Abstract

*The rise of the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria has ushered to the forefront the issue of territories governed by jihadi groups. This article offers an overview of previous and current “jihadi proto-states”, discusses their characteristics and common features, and explores ways of understanding their ultra-aggressive behaviour. Although attempts to form proto-states have been a constant feature of contemporary jihadism over the past 25 years, in the post-2011 Middle East, such attempts have multiplied and succeeded to a greater extent than in the past. These proto-states share at least four distinct characteristics: they are intensely ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive, and irredentist. They also devote significant resources to effective, if harsh, governance. The article argues that forming Islamic emirates and proto-states represents a bid for increased power and influence vis-à-vis rival Islamists. The uncompromising strategy pursued by jihadi proto-states is a result of the intense rivalry with other Islamist rebels as well as the proto-state’s dependence on external (“global jihadi”) constituencies whose allegiance and support can only be maintained by demonstrating a high ideological commitment.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, rebel governance, ISIS, al-Qaida, ideology

### Introduction

The so-called “Islamic State” (IS), an al-Qaida offshoot group which has conquered substantial parts of northern Syria and Western Iraq, has drawn attention to the question of jihadism and state building. Although this new entity is clearly an unprecedented development in many respects, it is far from the first jihadi republic. In fact, over the past 25 years jihadi insurgents have repeatedly announced the formation of “Islamic states” or “emirates” in many parts of the Muslim world, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Caucasus, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Gaza, Sinai, Cairo, Libya and northern Mali. Very few of these proto-states have survived for more than a year, and not all of them have actually controlled territory in any meaningful sense.

In most of these cases, the jihadis vowed to form “emirates” or “states” whose prospects for survival were poor to begin with. On top of that, these newborn jihadi proto-states often acted aggressively and provocatively vis-à-vis the outside world, seemingly in contradiction with the goal of consolidating territorial control and obtaining some kind of international recognition. The paradox of jihadi state building is also evident in the way the jihadi ideology negates virtually all aspects of the Westphalian world order, including even the very names of existing states and their boundaries.[1] Why are jihadi rebels preoccupied with declaring their own states long before their goal of a liberated Islamic world is attained? Why do jihadis sometimes announce emirates whose actual territory is either undefined or lacking? And in those cases where territorial control is present, why do jihadis often jeopardize their hard-won territories by a highly aggressive policy vis-à-vis the outside world? Before exploring this puzzle in more detail, this article will first briefly define “jihadi proto-states” and then present a historical survey of such entities as a basis for identifying typical features, commonalities, and evolution over time.



### *Defining Jihadi Proto-States*

First of all, it might be useful to explain how one might define the term “jihadism” and, what jihadis mean when they speak of “emirates”. For simplicity, jihadism can be defined as the ideology of al-Qaida and other militant Islamist groups who refer to themselves as jihadis.[2] This definition has become slightly more problematic with the rise of pro-jihadi public activist groups like the Ansar al-Shari‘a organisations and the deep fissure between IS-aligned and AQ-allied groups.

“Emirate” (or *amirate*) (Arabic: إمارة *imārah*) literally means a “principality”, and usually refers to a territory ruled by an emir. The latter is usually translated as commander, general, prince, governor, or ruler. Emirate is sometimes used to denote political leadership or military office as opposed to spiritual (*imāmah*) leadership. In early Islamic history, emirates often came to denote local Muslim principalities or small kingdoms nominally subordinate to the Islamic Caliphate, established as part of Islam’s steady expansion eastwards and westwards, one prominent example being the Emirate of Córdoba.[3]

The Islamic scholar Akbar Ahmed has noted that “the original model of Islamic rule was the small tribal emirate”, inspired by the Rashidun caliphs who “preached and practiced austerity.”[4] As such the term “emirate” seems to have had a certain connotation of a frontline state, a jihad state, an Islamic warrior republic, fighting in the name of the Caliph and expanding his territory against non-Islamic powers.[5] This, together with the jihadists’ aversion against the usage of Western state concepts, may explain the popularity of the term among the contemporary jihadi movement.[6] Another reason for its prevalence may be that it does not actually require territorial control and is a less ambitious political project than a full-fledged Islamic state, let alone a Caliphate. An emir commanded the obedience of his immediate subordinates and those inhabiting the land he controlled, and unlike the Caliph, he could not lay claim to the allegiance of the worldwide community of Muslims.[7]

As practiced by contemporary jihadis, the territorial threshold for forming an emirate is actually very low, in the sense that the jihadis sometimes use the term about a small group of true believers who have sworn to obey an emir. Hence, it may simply consist of a neighbourhood, a refugee camp, or a group of prison inmates. An emirate, in other words, is a highly scalable concept in terms of territorial scope and material resources. The very *scalability* of the jihadi state-building project from mere a group of committed fighters to a full-fledged state with a multi-million size civilian population enables the jihadis to view every action they take as relevant for the ultimate goal of a powerful Caliphate ruling the Muslim world.

Al-Qaida and the contemporary jihadi movement dates back to the late 1980s. During this time frame a significant number of jihadi proto-states have existed, some more well-known than others. Below is a tentative overview of such proto-states, including actual state-like entities with a multi-year life span as well as short-lived, fictional ones that were declared mostly to challenge local authorities or rival Islamist organizations. Clearly, the level of territorial control, the size of their claimed territory, their longevity, their ability to attract and host foreign fighters all vary immensely. “The Islamic State” represents one end of the spectrum with some eight million people under its rule, a territory larger than the UK, an extensive bureaucracy, infrastructure, police, courts, and many other state attributes. At the other end of the spectrum are entirely aspirational efforts with little substance beyond online statements. One example of the latter is the *Jund Ansar Allah* militants in southern Gaza who proclaimed “an Islamic Emirate” in August 2009 as a way of challenging Hamas’ Islamic legitimacy and succeeded in provoking a fierce response.[8]

The list has been compiled based on a multiyear effort of tracing jihadi proto-states in available secondary literature and primary sources on jihadism. It is still probably incomplete, but may serve as a starting

point for identifying commonalities, differences, and not the least, the evolution of the jihadi proto-state phenomenon until the present day.

**Overview of Jihadi Proto-States (real and attempted), 1989-2015**

Name	Country / district / town, village	Time frame	Territorial control	Civilian institutions	Foreign fighters
Jama'at al Da'wa (Jamil al-Rahman) - The Islamic Emirate of Kunar	Afghanistan / Kunar Province	1989-91	Limited	No?	Yes
Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiya – "The Islamic Republic of Imbaba"	Egypt / Cairo / Imbaba	1989-1992 (late 1992)	Limited to local neighbourhoods in Imbaba	Yes	No
Groupe Islamique Armée	Algeria / Mitidja, parts of Greater Algiers, the cities of Lakhdaria, Medea, etc	c.1993-95	Yes, not complete	Yes	Very few
Taliban – The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan	(Most of) Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001.	c.1994 -	Yes, 90 % of Afghanistan by 2000. Significant pockets of territorial control since 2002.	Yes	Yes, very high number (esp. from Pakistan)
Jund al-Islam / Ansar al-Islam	Northern Iraq / Villages in the Howraman region (Biyara, Tawila, etc)	September 2001 – March 2003	Yes	Yes	Yes, small number
Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad / AQI / Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)	Iraq / parts of the Sunni Triangle (Faluja, Ramadi, etc)	2004-2008	Not permanent	Yes	Yes, high number
Al-Qaida, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Tehrik-e-Taliban	Pockets in FATA, NWFP, Waziristan	c.2006 ? –	Not permanent	No	Yes, high number
Al-Shabaab/ "The Islamic Emirate of Somalia"	Most of southern and central Somalia	2009-	Yes	Yes	Yes, high number, (esp. Somali diaspora)
Caucasus Emirate	Northern Caucasus	October 2007	Not permanent	Yes	Yes, small number
Fatah al-Islam	Lebanon / Nahr El-Bared refugee camp	May-June 2007	No, limited control of the refugee camp	Uncertain	Yes.

Jund Ansar Allah	Rafah, Gaza Strip	August 2009	No, only the Ibn Taymiya Mosque in Rafah	No	No (?)
<b>2011 - Arab revolutions and the onset of civil wars in Libya and Syria</b>					
AQAP – Ansar al-Shari’ah	Southern Yemen / Abyan Province (Zinjibar, Ja ‘ar, Shuqrah, etc)	2011-2012	Yes	Yes	Yes, small (?) number
AQIM – Ansar al-Dine, MUJAO (The Islamic Emirate of Azawad)	Northern Mali / Timbuktu, Kidal, Gao, etc	March 2012-2013	Yes	Yes	Yes, small (?) number
Jabhat al-Nusra	Syria, areas mostly in North-Western (Idlib) and South-Western Syria	2012 –	Yes	Yes	Yes, but far fewer than ISIS/IS
Islamic State of Iraq and Sham / The Islamic State	Large parts of northern Syria and western Iraq	2013 –	Yes	Yes	Yes, unprecedented (20,000?)
Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam (MSSI) – Ansar al-Shari’ah Libya – Islamic State’s Provinces of Barqah, Tripoli, and Fezzan	Libya / Derna, Benghazi, Sirte, etc	2014 –	Yes, (not permanent)	Yes	Yes
Bayt Ansar al-Maqdis– Islamic State’s Sinai Province	Egypt / Sinai	2011 –	No	Uncertain	Yes, small number
Boko Haram	(Large territories in) Northern Nigeria / towns and villages in Adamawa, Borno, etc	2014 –	Yes	Yes	Yes, but mostly from Niger, Cameroon, Chad, etc
AQAP – Ansar al-Shari’ah	South-Eastern Yemen / Mukallah	2015 –	Yes	Yes	Yes

Before the advent of the current “Islamic State”, the two most successful emirates – in the eyes of the jihadis – were the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Shabaab in Somalia.[9] In October 1997, the Taliban proclaimed itself as “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” and by 2000 it controlled almost 90 % of the country.[10] Even after its fall from power in Kabul in 2001, the Taliban’s Emirate has retained a significant degree of local control throughout Afghanistan, through its shadow governors, courts and provision of harsh, but effective justice.[11] From 2007 onwards, the Somali Shabaab rebel movement with an estimated 3,000 to 7,000 fighters captured most of southern Somalia, controlling at its height a territory the size of Denmark.[12] Its administrative structure (consisting of regional “wilāyāt” (Arabic) or “wilaayada” (Somali) usually translated as both “provinces” and “states” in Shabaab propaganda) resembled those of IS in terms of exercising

permanent territorial control and paying attention to providing some civilian services and meting out harsh justice.[13]

The most prominent example of small “Islamic emirates” with de facto territorial control in the pre-2011 era was that of the Ansar al-Islam organization in Northern Iraq in 2001-3, which ruled a cluster of villages outside Halabja near the Iranian border.[14] It established training camps and sharia courts, burnt un-Islamic books and destroyed Sufi shrines, and attracted a few hundred foreign fighters including al-Qaida militants fleeing Afghanistan. At the time, the small jihadi proto-state was deemed sufficiently threatening to become the first target to be bombed during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

While Taliban, Shabaab, and Ansar al-Islam all controlled territory, other jihadi proto-states have exercised only a very tenuous hold of their claimed territory. One such example is the “Caucasus Emirate”, formed in 2007 and claiming sovereignty over all of Northern Caucasus. Another example is the “Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)” whose existence was proclaimed in 2006. While failing to establish permanent territorial control, they both mounted extensive media campaigns and, to varying degrees, carried out non-military activities, especially in the way of implementing *Shari’ah*, clearly with a view of demonstrating that they had gone beyond being simply just another rebel organization. Although the Islamic State in Iraq failed abysmally in its attempt to become a state in the latter half of the 2000s, as a rebel organization, it survived. As the US withdrew from Iraq, Syria descended into civil war and the Iraqi government grew increasingly sectarian under Nouri al-Maliki, ISI bounced back and evolved into “the Islamic State”, the most internationalist and ideologically hardline jihadi proto-states we have seen so far.

If one should point out a watershed in the history of jihadi proto-states, it must be 2011 when the Arab Spring revolutions unsettled state authorities in the region. The upsurge in new jihadi proto-states over the past four years has been remarkable. The survey above counts some ten jihadi proto-states during the 22-year period between 1989 and 2011 and almost as many during the brief four year period since 2011. In Yemen, Al-Qaida on the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) and its Ansar al-Shari’a organization gained control over significant parts of the Abyan province for nearly a year and ran several “Islamic Emirates” there, inviting journalists there to witness life under “Sharia rule”. Having been driven from its territories in mid-2012, AQAP again captured large territories in South-Eastern Yemen in 2015, including the important city of Mukalla. In Northern Mali, another Al-Qaida affiliate, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in conjunction with local partner organizations such as Ansar al-Dine and MUJAO, overran and governed the region, including the historical site of Timbuktu, from March 2012 to January 2013, until a French-led military intervention dislodged the militants. In Northern Nigeria, the Boko Haram organization carved out a territory the size of Belgium in 2014. Finally, in Libya, various IS-aligned militia groups have captured significant pockets of territory, especially in the cities of Derna, Benghazi, and Sirte, where they fly the flag of IS on buildings and run police patrols in the streets. The proliferation of such militant non-state entities in the Middle East is unprecedented. There are few signs that this process is set to reverse any time soon, with the qualification that IS’s absorption of smaller entities as regional “provinces” may reduce the number, but not the geographical scope, of current jihadi proto-states.

### **Characteristics**

Despite their numerous differences, jihadi proto-states share a number of important characteristics. Most important is that they are all intensely *ideological projects*, i.e. their establishment is justified solely by the ideological imperative to establish *Shari’ah* (“to rule according to what God has revealed”) and wage jihad against God’s enemies.[15] Hence, their commitment to a particular territory is relatively low and vastly

different from that of separatist and nationalist rebel groups.[16] To demonstrate their ideological purity and allegiance to the jihadi movement's goal of liberating 'Muslim lands' and establishing 'God's rule', jihadi proto-states are eager to publicize and "market" their virtuous acts in the way of implementing Shari'ah. The ideological factor manifests itself in numerous ways, such as in the harsh treatment of minorities, the public application of physical punishments (*hudud*), and the marketing of their ideological acts in cyberspace. An integral part of the jihadi proto-state's ideological project is *iconoclasm*: the public destruction of "un-Islamic" shrines, tombs, and other manifestations of un-Islamic life. This is perhaps the most typical signaling act by jihadi proto-state builders: These acts, whether they occur in Nimrod, Palmyra, Timbuktu, or Bamyan, enrage the outside infidel world, and underline the defiance of the emerging jihadi proto-state.

Another key characteristic feature of jihadi proto-states is that they are all *internationalist projects*. Their pan-Islamist dimension is perhaps best illustrated by their desire and ability to attract foreign fighters, some of whom have served in more than one emirate. Their leaders often seek religious endorsement from foreign-based religious clerics and enlist funding and material support from external constituencies, not only from local sources.[17] They express solidarity, in both words and violent deeds, with other jihadi proto-state projects, and they sometimes compete with other jihadi emirates over media exposure on jihadi online channels.[18] The influx of foreign combatants and the jihadis' commitment to internationalist causes have led to situations where emerging jihadi emirate projects are seen as being "in, but not of," the local area in which they try to establish themselves.

A third feature of jihadi proto-states is their *aggressive behavior vis-à-vis* neighbouring states and the international community. Often, jihadi proto-states have caused such severe international security concerns that they attracted military intervention. Again, jihadism is a revolutionary ideology bent on altering the world order, and true to their ideology, jihadi proto-states do not respect international borders, drawn by the colonial powers. The Islamic State, for example, insists that it has only "frontlines", not borders, and takes great pride in demolishing the "Sykes-Picot" system. For jihadi proto-states, international terrorism is a legitimate weapon for future territorial expansion, and perhaps more important, it should serve as a "deterrent force" against attempts at reconquering the jihadi proto-state's territory.[19]

A fourth, and perhaps the most surprising, characteristic of jihadi proto-states is their *commitment to effective governance*. When controlling territory, jihadi proto-states from IS-rule in Mosul to Shabaab's administration in Southern Somalia, have proved *comparatively* effective in administrating and governing their territories and civilian populations, devoting significant resources to the provision of civilian services, an effective (but often very harsh) justice system, a commitment to training ideological cadres to administrative and military duties, organizing councils for tribal mediation, and the like.[20]

### ***Why Jihadi Proto-States?***

The declaration of a jihadi proto-state, whether "an Islamic emirate", an "Islamic state" or a "Caliphate", represents primarily a bid for increased power and influence vis-à-vis rival Islamist groups. It is basically a vehicle to increase one's influence and weight vis-à-vis competitors.[21] The question remains, however, how do we explain the observation that jihadi insurgent groups after declaring their ambitions to create territorial entities ('emirates'), do not adapt their behavior with a view to attaining statehood? Despite numerous attempts at creating jihadi proto-states, none has existed for very long, and even relatively long-lasting proto-states—the Taliban and Shabaab—appeared to grow more, not less, radical and uncompromising over time. True, the very move into state-building may be interpreted, in relative terms, as a move toward pragmatism. Furthermore, ultra-radical ideological groups may find satisfaction in remaining loyal to its ideological



message, even if it imperils its long-term material interests. Furthermore, learning to handle the practicalities of local governance and international relations is a long-term process. Internal al-Qaida correspondence suggests that jihadi proto-states have attempted to distill lessons learned and pass these on.[22] At the same time, the recipients of such recommendations have not heeded advice for pragmatism and gradualism, for example in the application of sharia laws. The Islamic Emirate of Azawad in Northern Mali, for example, went ahead with their *hudud* punishment shortly after seizing power, despite being warned against this by AQAP.[23] Shabaab proudly announced their entry into al-Qaida despite being warned against doing so by bin Laden, who feared that such a move would put undue international pressure on the nascent jihadi proto-state.[24]

There are two intertwined factors which may help us explain why jihadi proto-states sacrifice state building on the altar of ideological purity: (i) rebel rivalry and (ii) dependence on external constituencies. Competition with other Islamist rebels in the conflict area makes it harder for emerging jihadi proto-states to compromise and seek pragmatic non-ideological solutions without losing key constituencies. The internationalist character of jihadi insurgencies in which foreign fighters and external assistance play a key role, reinforces this reluctance to adapt non-ideological positions. The jihadi movement propagates the perception of multiple fronts in al-Qaida's war with the West.[25] Unlike ethnic diaspora communities who are bound to their homeland and its local struggles, the jihadi sympathizers have *multiple choices* about "which jihad" they would like to support and where to travel as foreign fighters. A jihadi insurgent group whose enforcement of Sharia is halfhearted and whose commitment to jihad is compromised by peace talks with the enemy will not attract ideologically committed foreign fighters. Hence, the radical agenda of external constituencies may therefore easily overrule local preferences in situations when the prospects of increased territorial control should have encouraged local rebels to adopt a more moderate posture.

As I have suggested elsewhere, the marketing metaphor is a useful avenue to understanding jihadi movements' behaviour in a competitive, media-driven world.[26] In his book *The Marketing of Rebellion*, Clifford Bob argues that "a few Third World political movements" have become "global causes célèbres" while most remain forgotten, precisely because they have proven themselves the savviest in "a Darwinian struggle for scarce resources." [27] External funding and support depend heavily on visibility in the media, which underlines the centrality of the jihadi online propaganda efforts. The actual size of the international jihadi funding market is impossible to estimate with precision, but available evidence suggest that external funding is substantial, even for groups with extensive internal sources of funding, like IS.[28] While it is inherently difficult to estimate the degree to which "market leaders" receive more resources than others, the flow of foreign fighters is a clear indication of which jihadi front receives most funding and media attention. Their presence deepens fundraising-, media- and recruitment networks linking the proto-state to the outside world. Foreign fighters bring large amounts of cash and equipment when they arrive and are often supported by fund-raising rings of supporters in their home countries.[29] The massive influx of foreign fighters to IS, exceeding by far any previous foreign fighter emigration in history, provides IS with not only highly motivated manpower, but cash, equipment and a worldwide recruitment and media network. It demonstrates IS's success in outbidding al-Qaida and becoming the undisputed "market leader" of jihad.

IS's (temporary?) victory over al-Qaida comes at a price, however. More than any other previous jihadi group, IS has invested heavily in demonstrating ideological purity. It has unleashed a vicious media campaign against the alleged "pragmatism" and "hypocrisy" of the al-Qaida leadership, thereby fracturing the global jihadi movement.[30] It has adopted maximalist goals, alienating other Islamist rebels in Syria and Iraq, and has created for itself an endless list of new enemies by its "mediatized barbarism".[31] Several observers have suggested that the apocalyptic nature of IS is the only logical answer to its irrational behavior.[32]

Such a view of jihadi proto-states goes beyond IS. For example, studies of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan have sometimes dubbed it “a Samson state”, whose rigid ideological agenda tied its hands to suicidal policy decisions which eventually imperiled the state’s very existence.[33]

Repeated jihadi attempts at forming ultra-radical states is not necessarily suicidal behavior by religious fanatics, when viewed from the perspective of jihadi strategists. In their view, an emirate represents only a tactical front in a larger transnational insurgency with multiple focal points and a largely de-territorialized popular support base.[34] What may appear as erratic behavior by jihadi groups according to classical insurgency theories may in fact be strategic adaptation to a globalized world where the old parameters of success are no longer valid. As has been suggested by the insurgency scholar John Mackinlay and others, jihadi insurgencies may be harbingers of a new post-Maoist model of insurgency in which the primary point of gravity or the “insurgent energy” is no longer located in rebel-controlled areas.[35] Nor is the ideological mobilization of the *local* population key to success. Instead, the critical core is the archipelago of diaspora communities, ideological support networks, and online sympathizers scattered around the world.[36] The continuous establishment of local emirates, even when they fail, serves a purpose because they galvanize this archipelago which embodies what is essentially a global insurgent movement.

Mackinlay’s “insurgent archipelago” thesis is intriguing, but should not lead us to dismiss the local power bases of jihadi proto-states. For example, most of IS’ revenues are generated locally. Still, the mere presence of more than 20,000 foreign fighters in the Syrian-Iraqi war theatre (not counting the thousands of Shiite and Kurdish foreign fighters) points to a fundamental shift in the organization and mobilization in contemporary insurgencies. Non-state transnational networks are no longer negligible actors compared to state sponsors in influencing local insurgencies.

Summing up, my preliminary hypothesis is that jihadi proto-states remain radical and uncompromising to the detriment of their state building ambitions because they seek support from a radical transnational support base whose hardline ideological agenda prevents a shift towards pragmatism. If this hypothesis holds water, then we might expect measures aimed at reducing rebel rivalry and preventing transnational mobilization of assistance to jihadi proto-states to induce jihadi insurgents to adopt more pragmatic and conventional strategies of territorialisation. Practitioners involved in combating jihadism should take notice of internal and external dynamics which may alter the overall calculus of jihadi proto-states.

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### Notes

[1] Jihadis usually avoid the names of existing states as Western colonial inventions and prefer terms hailing back to the early days of Islamic civilization, such as the “Land of the Two Rivers” instead of (most of) Iraq, the “Land of Khorasan” instead of Afghanistan (and beyond), and the “Islamic Maghreb” instead of (most of) North Africa, etc.

[2] The core tenets of jihadism is that the Islamic world is directly or indirectly ‘occupied’ by an alliance of ‘infidel crusader’ forces in collusion with nominally Muslim apostate regimes and that only a worldwide violent struggle against these forces will liberate the Muslim world. Transnational terrorism and mass murder – with some qualifications–are seen as legitimate means in this struggle. All Muslims, irrespective of geographical boundaries and ethnic divisions, are obliged to participate. “Al-Qaida” consists of the remaining al-Qaida leadership structures, located in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas, as well as regional branches and associated organizations, as well as a global web of sympathizers and supporters, often referred to as ‘the global jihadi movement’. Al-Qaida’s branches and associates have not necessarily adopted all of al-Qaida’s ideological worldview and modus operandi. While this delineation of jihadi vs. non-jihadi may seem fussy and terribly imprecise, there is a relatively strong awareness among jihadi sympathizers about ‘who is in’ and ‘who is out’. One reason for this is that al-Qaida’s media outlets, especially jihadi web forums, continuously update their audiences with news from the various jihadi ‘fronts’, containing reports and communiqués detailing the exploits of all active jihadi groups. Those not listed (such as Hamas, Hizbollah, etc) are per definition not jihadis. Among forum participants, there is also a continuous assessment of, and discussion about, the various groups’ armed activities and ideological production.

[3] For classical and modern Islamic thinkers on government and state, see for example Gerhard Bowering (ed.) *Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Reza Pankhurst, *The Inevitable Caliphate?: A History of the Struggle for Global Islamic Union, 1924 to the Present* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013); and “Islamic State”, *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, undated. URL: <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0394>.

[4] Akbar S. Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone: How America’s War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013, Kindle edition), not paginated, see subchapter on “Islamic Emirates and Tribal Societies”.

[5] As the early Caliphate gradually gave way to a more decentralized Islamic empire, with local Muslim governors usurping power, local emirates proliferated, especially along the Empire’s peripheries. For Islamic jurists’ treatment of the difficult issue of power sharing between the Caliph and his increasingly autonomous governors, see for example Mawārdī’s theory on Imāra and Wizāra in Ann K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (London: Routledge, 1981/2014), pp.83-102.

[6] The earliest example of the adoption of Emir/Emirate terminology by Salafi-Jihadi groups is uncertain. While the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood favoured other titles for their leader, such as *murshid* (guide), stressing the spiritual and non-assuming role of their leader, its militant offshoots in the 1970s began referring to their commanders as emirs. The term also appears to have gained more traction amongst Islamist writers. In the early 1990s, the French scholar Olivier Roy had taken notice of the proliferation of self-styled Islamic mini-states or communities, governed by ‘neofundamentalist’ Salafist adherents. These pockets of Islamized communities, partly isolated from their surroundings were the result of a broader wave of Islamisation from below which characterized parts of the Muslim world from the 1970s onwards. Roy observed more concrete manifestations of self-styled Islamic statelets. In what he saw as a relatively new phenomenon in the Muslim world, territorial pockets underwent “a transformation [...] at a subnational level, into an Islamic entity, directly connected to the outside world by religious and economic networks, and in which Islamic scholars (ulama) and traders acted as ‘the tools and agents of local autonomy’”. One place where Islamic emirates proliferated was the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan from the 1980s onwards, where local tribesmen under the leadership of a mullah and his supporters in the Pakistani Salafi movement Ahl-I Hadith set up an Islamic Emirate in Nuristan in 1984. A more well-known example is “the Islamic Emirate of Kunar” – a mini-state established by the Afghan shaykh Jamil al-Rahman in 1989, and which lasted until his assassination in 1991. Two years later, another and more short-lived attempt at forming an Islamic emirate took place, this time by a group of Arab-Afghan veterans in the Khaybar agency. During early and mid-1990s, when Egypt was shaken by a wave of violent unrest, militant Islamist groups repeatedly declared the establishment of Emirates in their strongholds. In 1992, the Egyptian army sent in tanks and thousands of troops into the impoverished Cairo district of Imbaba “where Islamic groups had virtually controlled whole neighborhoods and set up their own ‘Emirate of Imbaba.’” See Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 42ff, 84; Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: the search for a new Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2002), pp. 284; Anne Stenersen, *Brothers in Jihad: The Alliance between al-Qaida and the Taliban* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2016); Nibras Kazimi, “The Caliphate attempted”, *Current trends in Islamist Ideology* 7 (July 2008), pp. 16-17; Michael Collins Dunn, “Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia Accuse Sudan, as Halaib Dispute Flares Up”, *MERIP*, (February 1993), p. 33; and author’s own interviews in Cairo in 1993-95.

[7] See Joas Wagemakers’ discussion on *bay’a* in his article in this issue of PoT.

[8] “Radical Muslim cleric among 21 killed in Gaza clashes”, *CNN.com*, 16 August 2009. URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/08/15/gaza.clashes/index.html?iref=24hours>.

- [9] Consider the following quote from Anwar al-Awlaki: “The two most successful examples, even though far from perfect, of Islamic rule in this past decade were the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamic courts in Somalia. In both countries only these Muslim fighters brought peace, security and rule of law in both countries. Both movements reached to power not through elections or debates but through war.” Cited in “Anwar al Awlaki: a question about the method of establishing Caliphate,” *Kavkaz Center*, 13 January 2009. URL: <http://kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2009/01/13/10562.shtml>.
- [10] “Afghanistan: Taleban Declare Afghanistan ‘an Islamic Emirate,’” *AFP*, 27 October 1997; and Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (London: Hurst, 2005), p. 281.
- [11] Jami Forbes, “The Significance of Taliban Shari’a Courts in Afghanistan,” *CTC Sentinel*, 6 (5) (May 2013), pp. 13-16. For Taliban’s own portrayal of its governance structures as of 2010, see Ikram Miyundi, “The Islamic Emirate Of Afghanistan And Its Successful Administrative Policy,” *Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam*, 25 December 2010, <http://www.shamikh1.net/vb/showthread.php?t=91308>.
- [12] For estimates of the number of Shabaab fighters in 2013, see “Al-Shabaab (Al-Shabab),” *GlobalSecurity.org*, undated. URL: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/al-shabaab.htm>.
- [13] See discussion on Shabaab’s governance in Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 6.
- [14] Interestingly, unlike the Taliban movement, Shabaab and Ansar al-Islam did not consistently refer to themselves as “emirates” or “states”. The Shabaab movement retained its original name (which roughly translates “The Mujahideen Youth Movement”), and its leadership repeatedly declined proposals that its name be formally changed to the “Islamic Emirate of Somalia”. The latter term was sometimes used in jihadist propaganda material, however, and Shabaab used the term “state” about its provinces. The confusion regarding Shabaab’s name seems to reflect internal struggle within the Shabaab leadership regarding the organization’s future orientation, in which a “nationalist wing” reportedly sought to re-name the group as the “Islamic Emirate of Somalia” and refocus on local governance instead of moving the organization closer to al Qaeda. See Brownyn Bruton and J. Peter Pham, “The Splintering of Al Shabaab: A Rough Road From War to Peace,” *ForeignAffairs.com*, (2 February 2012). URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2012-02-02/splintering-al-shabaab>; “Fatwa of Somali Scholars on Current Affairs in the Country,” *Associated Press*, 29 February 2012. (From AP’s collection of documents retrieved from a building occupied by al-Qaida fighters in Timbuktu, Mali). URL: [http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/\\_international/\\_pdfs/al-qaida-papers-somalia-fatwa.pdf](http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-papers-somalia-fatwa.pdf); and “AlShabaab to Change Name to Imaarah Islamiyah. AlShabaab Declares ‘Islamic Emirate’ of Somalia,” *SomaliaReport*, 5 December 2011. URL: [http://www.somaliareport.com/index.php/post/2212/AlShabaabto\\_Change\\_Name\\_to\\_Imaarah\\_Islamiyah](http://www.somaliareport.com/index.php/post/2212/AlShabaabto_Change_Name_to_Imaarah_Islamiyah).
- [15] The following statement by “the creators of Imarat Kavkaz” is illustrative: “the basis for the proclamation of the Islamic State was the bounden duty of Muslims before Allah to set in the territories under their control the law of Allah – the Sharia.” Cited in “Statement on creation of Imarat Kavkaz,” *Caucasian Knot*, 29 December 2014. URL: <http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/30497/>.
- [16] The perhaps most important ideological dictum on the necessity of a state was formulated by Ayman al-Zawahiri’s *Knights under the Prophet’s Banner* in 2001, later expanded and updated in 2010, in which he declared that “The mujahid Islamic movement will not triumph against the world coalition unless it possesses a fundamentalist base in the heart of the Islamic world.” Interestingly, al-Zawahiri was not concerned about the precise location, attributes, or extent of this territorial base, nor its relationship to other states in the region. Rather, the territorial entity envisioned by al-Zawahiri was more akin to a piece of liberated territory from which to expand further and assist other like-minded liberated territorial entities rather than a state of its own.
- [17] For example, in late 2010, the Caucasus Emirate obtained a widely publicized fatwa from the prominent Syrian Islamist scholar Abu Basir al-Tartousi in London in which he declared that “The Mujahidin under the leadership of Dokku Umarov are the legal rulers, under Sharia law, of their countries and their people. It is obligatory to unite with them and submit to their rule.” Cited in “Fatwa of Sheikh Abu Basir al-Tartusi on the Jihad in the Caucasus (in Russian),” *Ansar AlJihad Network*, 24 August 2010. URL: <http://www.ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=26120>. The fatwa was initially made in Arabic in a telephone interview, posted on the Caucasus Emirate’s websites, and later translated into many languages.
- [18] See for example Andrei Smirnov, “Umarov Trying to Increase Financial Support from the Middle East,” *North Caucasus Analysis* (Jamestown Foundation), 8 (41) (25 October 2007). URL: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=4505#.VZQEm\\_nltBd](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4505#.VZQEm_nltBd).
- [19] Al-Qaida strategist Abu Bakr Naji argued that jihadi emirates could be defended effectively. He pointed in particular to the importance of developing a sufficiently strong “deterrent force”, in the form of international operations, but he acknowledged “the problem of aerial attacks of the enemy – Crusader or apostate – on military training camps or residential areas in areas which we administer”. Cited in Abu Bakr Naji, “Management of Savagery”, pp. 15-16, 32.

[20] The initial popularity of some jihadi proto-states, including the Taliban and Shabaab, stemmed from their removal of unpopular warlords and the establishment of a monopoly of power, which ensured some level of security and predictability in otherwise wartorn countries.

[21] The Jund Ansar Allah's Emirate proclamation in Gaza is illustrative: "The group posted a statement on the site announcing the establishment of the Islamic emirate in Gaza and proclaiming al-Maqqdassi 'the commander of the faithful'. The statement declared that armed forces in Gaza should unite under him. The statement urged Muslims everywhere to support the 'young emirate' and provide the group with money, weapons and men because 'this is the hope of the Muslim nation in raising the banner of monotheism in Palestine and to liberate all the lands and purify Al-Aqsa mosque from the filth of the damned Jews'. The group accused Hamas of not being Islamic enough, saying Hamas cares more about pleasing 'tyrants' than 'obeying God.'" Cited in "13 die as Islamic radicals, Hamas clash in Gaza", *CNN.com*, 14 August 2009. URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/08/14/gaza.clashes/index.html?iref=nextin>.

[22] See for example AQAP-AQIM correspondence on the former's experiences in rebel governance in "Wuhayshi imparted lessons of AQAP operations in Yemen to AQIM", *Long War Journal*, 12 August 2013. See also Bin Laden's letter in *United States v. Abid Naseer*, February 15, 2015. GOVERNMENT EXHIBIT 425 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD) Letter to Shaykh Mahmud. Signed Your brother Zamuray Saturday, August/7/2010 [bin Laden]. URL: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.documentcloud.org/documents/1686788/abid-naseer-trial-abbottabad-documents-exhibits.pdf>

[23] Andrew Lebovich noted in a study of jihadism in Northern Mali that "[t]he jihadists' rush to impose Shari'a and hudud punishments—including stonings, amputations, and public whippings—even embarrassed AQIM's leadership in northern Algeria, prompting a strong, private rebuke from the group's leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel [...]". Cited in Andrew Lebovich, "The Local Face of Jihadism in Northern Mali", *CTC Sentinel*, 25 June 2013. URL: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-local-face-of-jihadism-in-northern-mali>.

[24] "Bin Laden told Shabaab to hide al Qaeda ties", *Long War Journal*, 3 May 2012. URL: [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/05/bin\\_laden\\_instructs.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/05/bin_laden_instructs.php).

[25] A multipronged state building strategy, even if it occurs without much coordination, fosters a sense of moral solidarity, creates synergy effects between the different fronts, and offers better prospects for increased transnational ideological mobilization. It also offers important experiences and lessons learned which are discussed and transferred to the next jihadi proto-state project.

[26] Brynjar Lia, "The Islamic State and its Mediatized Barbarism", *New Middle East Blog*, 14 March 2015. URL: <https://newmeast.wordpress.com/2015/03/14/the-islamic-state-is-and-its-mediatized-barbarism/>.

[27] Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[28] For example, one fund-raiser in Kuwait reportedly sent \$2 million a month to IS's predecessor in Iraq. "Treasury Designates Al-Qa'ida Supporters in Qatar and Yemen", U.S. Department of Treasury, Press Release, 18 December 2013. URL: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2249.aspx>.

[29] Although IS's "primary sources of revenue" derived from "illicit proceeds from its occupation of territory", the foreign fighters "continue to be a relatively small, but important source of funding" for the organization. See *Financing of the Terrorist Organisation Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)*, FATF Report, February 2015. URL: <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/Financing-of-the-terrorist-organisation-ISIL.pdf>.

[30] See for example the cover story of IS online magazine entitled "Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan: A Testimony from Within", *Dabiq*, No.6, Rabi al-Awwal 1436.

[31] Lia, "The Islamic State and its Mediatized Barbarism".

[32] See for example Peter Bergen's assessment that "[i]ts actions do indeed seem to make no sense or are self-destructive". Cited in Peter Bergen, "Why does ISIS keep making enemies?", *CNN.com*, 18 February 2015. URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/16/opinion/bergen-isis-enemies/>

[33] See the interesting discussion about Taliban as "a Samson state" in Svante E. Cornell, "Taliban Afghanistan: A True Islamic State?", in Brenda Shaffer (ed.) *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs), pp. 263-289.

[34] See Abu Bakr Naji, "Management of Savagery".

[35] John Mackinlay, *Insurgent Archipelago; From Mao to bin Laden* (London: Hurst, 2009).

[36] For an interesting comparison between the jihadi movement and the Maoist insurgency model, Michael F. Morris, *Al Qaeda as Insurgency* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2005). URL: <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/ksil234.pdf>.



## Is ISIS a Revolutionary Group and if Yes, What Are the Implications?

by Stathis N. Kalyvas

### *Abstract*

*Can we understand The Islamic State as a revolutionary group? And should we? If the answer is positive, what are the implications that follow? I discuss a number of dimensions, including combat, organization, and governance to assess the extent to which the experience of revolutionary groups during the Cold War, mostly of various Marxist persuasions, may help enhance our understanding of the current practices and future prospects of the Islamic State. I argue that thinking of the Islamic State as a revolutionary group opens up new perspectives that take advantage of the recent historical record, while shielding us from overly exceptionalist interpretations.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, ISIS, civil war, insurgency, Marxist groups, revolutionary insurgencies

### **1. Introduction**

The emergence of the Islamic State (or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-ISIS) as a major rebel organization in Syria, its subsequent expansion at the expense of competing Syrian insurgent groups, and its rapid conquest of vast swaths of territory in Iraq in the summer of 2014 (including the cities of Mosul and most recently of Ramadi) took most observers by surprise. Its subsequent resilience in the face of a sustained US-led bombing campaign in conjunction with the regular deployment of spectacular acts of violence—as well as its ability to attract thousands of volunteers from across Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia—gave rise to a profusion of arguments about the nature and character of what was only recently an unknown entity. Not surprisingly, a large proportion of these arguments converge in stressing the religious dimension of ISIS. [1]

While such a focus is certainly warranted, it is alternatively possible to also see ISIS as a “revolutionary” armed group. In turn, such a framing would imply a different way of understanding ISIS and similar jihadi groups.[2] Doing so has the advantage of eschewing the temptation of exceptionalism and bringing to the fore the rich experience of revolutionary insurgencies during the Cold War—and more generally the wealth of insights generated by the comparative study of civil wars.

### **2. How the comparative study of civil wars deals with different rebel types**

The comparative study of civil wars constitutes an extensive body of research, primarily located in political science, that has gradually moved away from an initial search of a set of master structural variables underlying civil wars (poverty, ethnic diversity, etc.) to focus instead on the characteristics of rebel groups and how they may affect strategic choices and performance. Still, the study of exactly how political identity, including associated ideological differences, help explain variation in group behavior and outcomes remains under-explored.[3]

Until recently, the main dimension of rebel type that had attracted scholarly attention was based on ethnicity. The distinction, first of ethnic and non-ethnic wars, and later of ethnic and non-ethnic rebel groups has generated considerable research output, mainly stressing two variables: political inclusion or exclusion and horizontal (that is, group-level) economic inequality. A different and intriguing (yet less popular) distinction has focused on the economic endowments of rebel groups, thus separating poor from wealthy

rebels and drawing several empirical implications, mostly related to the use of violence.[4] Recent studies have emphasized a number of different organizational dimensions, primarily on the rebel side, but also on the state side, including comparisons between “ideological” and “non-ideological” groups and between Islamist and nationalist groups.[5] On the theoretical and conceptual front, a compelling case has been made for the necessity of taking the ideology of rebel groups into account.[6] Perhaps the most important recent contribution in that respect is the social-institutional theory proposed by Paul Staniland, which predicts that the level of cohesion and performance of rebel groups is a function of the prewar networks where insurgent leaders were embedded. Staniland posits four basic types of rebel groups (integrated, vanguard, parochial, and fragmented) reflecting different combinations of reliance on prewar networks which, he argues, hold more predictive power on the level of group cohesion and survival than variables such as ideology, ethnicity, state enemy or resource flows.[7]

Overall, this is a new and promising literature, still at an early stage and subject to considerable confusion as the various dimensions of interest proliferate. At the same time, empirical research is primarily located at the subnational level, comparing groups at the local level. Research is now moving to a new level where subnational research projects are producing a set of robust findings that can begin to be compared to each other. In turn, such comparisons will allow us to formulate scope conditions about different subsets of civil wars and their etiology which will eventually substitute present “lowest common denominator” approaches that have been rather unsuccessfully searching for a master set of universal predictors of civil wars.

### **3. Revolutionary Rebels**

Where does the “revolutionary” dimension fit it—and what exactly does it mean and capture? In its simplest formulation proposed herein, a revolutionary group can be defined as a group that aims not just to gain power but self-consciously to transform society in a deep and radical way, by profoundly rearranging social and political relations. It is probably hard to measure the revolutionary character of a group in a precise way, but the distinction makes sense in a more general way: it is much less hard to distinguish revolutionary groups from groups that just aim to acquire power for its own sake—even when the latter may enact policies that inadvertently may impact on everyday life (hence the self-conscious transformative element). Fidel Castro and Charles Taylor represent two ideal-type leaders in that respect.

The characterization of a group as revolutionary captures a set of other features. A revolutionary group is by definition ideological, although not all ideological groups are revolutionary. Nationalist/secessionist groups can be revolutionary if the nation-state is not the norm (for example in an imperial setting). Revolutionary groups could be either vanguard or integrated, following Staniland’s formulation, but not parochial, and they can be either poor or wealthy (if they exploit natural resources, such as the FARC in Colombia, or receive extensive foreign assistance, as the MPLA in Angola). In short, this is a characterization that is general enough to subsume several dimensions analyzed in the literature, yet specific enough to be analytically useful.

Given this approach, would it be meaningful at all to describe ISIS as a revolutionary group? If we conceive of revolution as the attempt to put a utopian social program into action, such that its resulting application would upend existing social and political relations in a significant way, then clearly ISIS is a revolutionary group (see, for example, Aymenn al-Tamimi’s article in this special issue). No one would dispute that ISIS pushes forward an agenda of far-reaching social and political transformation. In fact, one of the foremost (if often, implicit) critiques of the use of revolutionary identity in political analysis—namely, that it is mere

window dressing to facilitate access to foreign assistance—obviously does not apply to ISIS, a group that seems to display an excess of revolutionary zeal.

What do we know about the impact of the revolutionary character of certain rebel actors on their behavior and performance? In ongoing research with Laia Balcells, we have investigated the correlates of revolutionary Marxist insurgencies, which flourished during the Cold War.[8] We found that these rebel groups were associated with longer and deadlier conflicts that typically took the form of irregular or guerrilla war. We also found, contrary to our expectations, that they were more likely to end up on the losing side of the conflict than almost any other group, nationalist or simply power-oriented. We explained this puzzling outcome (“the Marxist paradox”) by stressing the fact that these groups fought against states that were both stronger and also tended to be strengthened by the revolutionary challenge they faced. In a context characterized by systemic and international rivalries, robust foreign assistance and socially redistributive programs helped shore up the capacity of the state to face these Marxist rebels. In an ironic and indirect way, then, Marxist-inspired rebellions ended up shoring up state capacity. Lastly, we located an interesting exception to the tendency of Marxist rebels to be defeated: Marxist-inspired national liberation movements (i.e. nationalist or secessionist groups) proved much more successful, suggesting that the combination of a social revolutionary agenda and a nationalist identity could be quite powerful.

#### ***4. Key dimensions of revolutionary rebels***

In what follows, I take this analysis a step further by identifying several dimensions at the “meso” level, where a revolutionary identity could provide some analytical leverage—and then see what we can learn in the case of ISIS. More specifically, I focus on three key (and related) dimensions: combat, organization, and governance.

One of the most interesting features of the Marxist rebel groups that fought in major civil wars (which differentiates the large and consequential groups from the hundreds of stillborn ones) is that they almost chose to fight irregular or guerrilla wars. Indeed, modern guerrilla war was invented primarily by Marxist revolutionaries and practiced largely by them, although it spilled over to other groups as well. Why? The answer is that these groups had some organizational characteristics that allowed them to implement this very demanding form of war.

Irregular war is asymmetric by definition, as it pits a militarily weaker actor against a stronger one. In purely military terms, asymmetry makes no sense: it is resolved in the battlefield in favor of the stronger actor. This is why, in a conventional war, the balance of power and final outcome is largely a function of resources plus strategy. Therefore, the very fact that a weaker actor can fight in a sustained way (and, often, for a very long time) against a stronger one is a reflection of factors that compensate for the resource deficit of the weaker actor. These factors are largely organizational.

In the large body of literature covering the organization and practice of insurgency and counterinsurgency,[9] the emphasis is on ideology rather than organization: the ability of the rebels to win over the local population through ideology (their “hearts and minds”) is considered of essence for the ability of the rebels to operate (“like fish in the water”). However, in practice, even if ideology is necessary in producing popular support and mobilization, it is never sufficient. When one reads how rebel groups manage to obtain the consent, if not always the support, of the population, one finds three types of stories, which are far from mutually exclusive:

- The first story is about the ability of a group to establish (and provide the public good of) order in areas where anarchy disrupted livelihoods.

- The second story is about the ability of a group to police a territory effectively and identify and punish “defectors” (i.e. individuals assisting or working for their rivals) and reward supporters.[10]
- The third story is about the ability of the group to effectively govern a territory and supply the local population with public goods and governance, thus establishing itself as the de facto rulers.

In all these stories, popular consent and collaboration (what is often described as “support”) is the outcome of the organizational ability to perform these tasks. Compared to other type of groups, an argument can be made that revolutionary groups have a better ability to perform these tasks. I focus on this question below.

### ***5. ISIS as a revolutionary group***

The following appears to be largely the story of ISIS: it uses its clandestine organization to infiltrate territories held by its opponents, begins a campaign of selective violence there, and only attacks when the enemy has weakened.[11] This is a hybrid strategy of guerrilla war in a first stage and conventional war in a second one. The main difference between ISIS military tactics and that of the older Marxist groups is the extent to which conventional military fighting is enacted from very early on, both in Syria and Iraq. Of course, the Maoist doctrine of irregular war posited conventional war as the final stage of the war. However, conventional war is the main type of combat that ISIS uses so far (and this differentiates it from other jihadi rebels, such as the Algerian GIA, for instance). This particularity is likely due to a combination of the flat terrain of Syria and Iraq and the military weakness of its opponents. In addition, the endogenous dynamics of conflict have played a key role through “positive resource shocks” in the form of sudden capture of massive quantities of heavy weaponry. For example, when ISIS took Mosul in June 2014, it captured 1,500 Humvees, 52 M198 Howitzers and much more. In other words, ISIS benefited from a rare constellation of very weak yet heavily endowed opponents.[12]

Unlike the conventional nature of fighting, the control of territory is an essential feature of all civil wars. That jihadi groups had in the past opted primarily for a type of fighting that was based on clandestine organization and spectacular attacks (a strategy known as “terrorism”) was a reflection of their extreme weakness. Once they could set up larger organizations in states whose repressive apparatus had been depleted due to external shocks (e.g., Iraq after 2003 and Syria after 2011), they could step up their game. In other words, the conquest and control of territory was endogenous to the strategic situation rather than a first-order choice that requires a complicated explanation.[13]

This in turn, raises the question of why revolutionary organizations have an advantage over non-revolutionary ones when it comes to organization (note here that this is a different question from why some revolutionary groups are more successful than other revolutionary groups). The answer is probably that these groups have the ability to recruit and retain motivated cadres (“middle managers” in business parlance, “junior officers” in military parlance). Indeed, Marxist revolutionary groups were very effective, under some conditions, in recruiting highly motivated individuals who perform the risk tasks required of them. Note that this is a very different implication from the standard one in the mass mobilization/collective action literature, which assumes that the key actors are motivated individuals at the mass level.

Clearly, ISIS has the capacity to deploy an organization staffed by motivated cadres, and this goes a long way toward explaining its success and its ability to prevail over its more fragmented rivals. Exactly how ISIS recruits, trains, motivates, and retains its cadres is one of the most pressing research questions. On this point, the research carried out on Marxist revolutionary groups can be highly suggestive and includes their emphasis on ideological indoctrination and constant transnational cross-fertilization.

But why would revolutionaries have an advantage in the recruitment of cadres? Initially, one has to look at the structural conditions that give rise to a small number of people willing to undertake radical action, including external shocks such as the collapse of order following a foreign invasion and occupation. The following step is the coordination of these people by an existing organization. In turn, the two key factors that may explain the presence and ability of this organization to successfully recruit cadres are already existing organizational legacies and the resonance of its ideological message.

The last part of the story has to do with the ability of the organization to replenish its ranks, which are naturally depleted in conditions of military struggle. Like other revolutionary groups in the past, ISIS has profited handsomely from the infusion of foreign fighters in its ranks, a feature of rebel groups that have had the capacity to rely on a diffuse transnational social movement. However, the strength of ISIS cannot be reduced to the contribution of foreign fighters, who remain primarily in the organization's lower ranks, but instead is derived in part from its ability to link up with the population, once it becomes its *de facto* ruler.

The emergence of a literature on rebel governance is one of the most interesting recent developments in the comparative study of civil wars, and provides evidence for the importance of rebel governance in the context of civil wars, while establishing why certain rebel organizations deviate from either the clandestine presence or the roving bandit type.<sup>[14]</sup> The impact of revolutionary groups on the type of rebel governance is double-edged. On the one hand, they are able to deploy their organization in a way that allows them to be consistent in governance, which is always appreciated. Additionally, they are keen to mobilize and indoctrinate the population, which is always a way to generate additional supporters and fighters. On the other hand, their governance is likely to be highly interventionist, to clash with established norms and practices, and thus likely to generate considerable opposition and resentment. One of the most interesting lessons one learns about successful revolutionary governance is the extent to which it was based on a realistic moderation of their most doctrinaire demands. The key implication for ISIS would be to see whether the way it rules will remain harsh and demanding, or follow a more moderate path (such as the Taliban's eventually became). If the former is the case, it is likely to generate an opposition that could be leveraged against it by its opponents, very much like the Americans did in Iraq in the mid-2000s.

The final point worth making is the experience of the so-called national liberation movements of the Cold War. If these movements were successful, it was because they were able to combine in the same organization radical, vanguard elements with local, parochial constituencies (they were "integrated" groups in Staniland's parlance). Although we know that this combination is a major achievement, we still do not know what factors make it more likely. There is an element of group-based nationalism in ISIS, via its representation of the disaffected Sunni populations of Syria and Iraq, but it is probably the case that it is more of a revolutionary group mobilization Sunni people than a Sunni peoples' organization with a revolutionary cover. Lastly, the exact function of religion for ISIS needs to be investigated more carefully. To be sure, religion acts as the sort of credibly utopian vision that motivates individuals to join the fight and put their lives on the line, very much like socialism or nationalism do for secular movements. But is there a dimension beyond ideology where religion (and, in particular, this form of religion) really matters—and if yes, exactly how?

## **6. Conclusion**

To summarize these brief reflections, I hope to have made a strong case that (a) it makes sense, if only for heuristic reasons, to think of ISIS as a revolutionary group; (b) such a characterization allows us to derive interesting implications from a comparison with the experience of past revolutionary groups, especially the Marxist groups of the Cold War; and (c) in turn, this comparison could act as a check against claims of ISIS



exceptionalism and uniqueness and generate new questions about its practices and behavior that are worth pursuing.

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### Notes

- [1] A typical assessment goes as follows: ISIS's "rise to power is less like the triumph of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (a group whose leaders the Islamic State considers apostates) than like the realization of a dystopian alternate reality in which David Koresh or Jim Jones survived to wield absolute power over not just a few hundred people, but some 8 million." Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>. See also Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Massacre Strategy. Why ISIS brags about its Brutal Sectarian Murders," *Politico Magazine*, 17 June 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/the-massacre-strategy-107954.html#.VSBkAvnF98H>.
- [2] Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Logic of Violence in the Islamic State's War," *The Washington Post*, 7 July 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/07/the-logic-of-violence-in-islamic-states-war/>.
- [3] Christopher Blattman and Edward Miguel, "Civil War," *Journal of Economic Literature* 48(1): 3–57, 2010.
- [4] Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion. The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- [5] Some notable recent contributions include Juan E. Ugarriza and Matthew J. Craig, "The Relevance of Ideology to Contemporary Armed Conflicts: A Quantitative Analysis of Former Combatants in Colombia," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57 (3): 445–477, 2012 and Monica Duffy Toft and Yuri M. Zuhov, "Islamists and Nationalists: Rebel Motivation and Counterinsurgency in the North Caucasus," *American Political Science Review* 109 (2), 222–238, 2015.
- [6] Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Ideology in Civil War: Instrumental Adoption and Beyond," *Journal of Peace Research* 51 (2): 213–226, 2014.
- [7] Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion. Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014.
- [8] Stathis N. Kalyvas and Laia Balcells, "Revolutionary Rebels and the "Marxist Paradox," Working Paper, 2015.
- [9] For a review, see Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006 and David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- [10] The selective use of violence by ISIS in this respect has been extremely successful in this respect, although it has received much less coverage compared to its act of spectacular violence against mostly Western hostages and massacres against Shia fighters. Kalyvas, 2014, *ibid*; Erika Solomon and Sam Jones, "Battling ISIS, A Long Campaign Ahead," *Financial Times*, 8 June 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/33a0e52c-0ac9-11e5-a8e8-00144feabd00.html#axzz3ce6YnJeY>.
- [11] Solomon and Jones, *ibid*.
- [12] "Iraqi Army Remains on Defensive as Extent of June Debacle Becomes Clear," McClatchyDC, 14 July 2014, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article24770476.htm>.
- [13] Such as the following one: "The Islamic State, by contrast, requires territory to remain legitimate." Wood, *ibid*.
- [14] Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011; Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

## Heirs of Zarqawi or Saddam? The relationship between al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamic State

by Truls Hallberg Tønnessen

### *Abstract*

*This paper examines the relationship between al-Qaida in Iraq and Islamic State, asking what remains of AQI within the current incarnation of IS. The study is based on available information concerning the backgrounds and the roles of the top leaders within AQI/IS over the last ten years, with a particular focus on their respective relationship to the Baath party, AQI, and al-Qaida Central. Despite the apparent historical continuity between AQI and IS, there are several differences concerning the background and networks of the respective leaderships. A case can be made that Jabhat al-Nusra is connected to some of same regional networks that established AQI, while IS is more of an extension of the Iraqi faction within AQI and of other indigenous networks like the Baath party and other insurgent groups.*

**Keywords:** ISIS, al-Qaida, Jihadism, Iraq, leadership

### *Introduction*

The historical origin of the group known as “the Islamic State” (IS) has been traced back to the Jordanian Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi and his establishing a training camp for Arab foreign fighters in Herat, Afghanistan, at the turn of the century. Scholars and IS itself have described the establishment of an Islamic State as the fulfillment of Zarqawi’s vision.[1] At the same time, IS has also been described as the heirs of Saddam Hussein and the Baath party that ruled Iraq with an iron fist from 1968 until it was disbanded in the wake of the U.S invasion of Iraq in 2003.[2] There is an element of truth in both descriptions. Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), the group founded by Zarqawi in Iraq in 2004 was the leading faction behind the founding of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in October 2006 together with several other Iraqi insurgent groups. In 2013 ISI became known as the Islamic State in Iraq and in Syria (ISIS), and from June 2014 as “the Islamic State” (IS). Yet, since 2006 several of ISI’s top leaders, including veterans of AQI, have been killed and replaced with new leaders. In 2010 almost the entire top echelon of ISI was eliminated and replaced with a new generation of leaders. Among this new generation of leaders there are very few known AQI veterans. Instead, the top leadership of IS seems to have been populated by former Iraqi officers who were removed from their positions when the Iraqi army was disbanded in 2003.

Either interpretation has implications for our understanding of the group, its agenda, and the international threat it poses. Should the Islamic State primarily be interpreted as a religious cover for a resurgent Baath-party aiming to recapture power in Iraq and seeking to exploit the foreign fighters’ ideological zeal, or is the group’s main motivation genuinely to establish and expand the so-called Islamic State? This paper assumes that the top leadership of a terrorist group, their respective backgrounds, their experience and connections can shape a group’s agenda, strategy and target selection.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to study the relationship between AQI and IS and what remains of AQI within the current incarnation of IS. The study is based on available information concerning the backgrounds and roles of the top leaders within AQI/IS the last ten years, with a particular focus on their relationship to the Baath party, AQI, and al-Qaida Central. The official martyr biographies issued by AQI/ISI is an important source for the paper, in addition to other sources. It is sometimes difficult to confirm the veracity of these

biographies, and it is especially difficult to find reliable information on the background on the current IS leaders as there often exist multiple accounts, often both from pro- and anti-IS sources. Still, the available sources are rich enough to reveal some general patterns in the leadership composition.

I argue that the influence of AQI diminished over time as several of the founding fathers of AQI were killed and replaced with new leaders who not had been members of AQI. This process appears to have been partly a consequence of an internal struggle for power between the remnants of AQI and the new leaders that gradually managed to sideline the old AQI-generation. It could also be argued that the establishment of IS's Syrian branch, Jabhat al-Nusra, was partly an effect of this internal power struggle, one that formalized the split between the two different factions. Most of the networks associated with AQI and its founder Zarqawi seem to have joined or supported Jabhat al-Nusra, not IS.

### *The role of AQI veterans within the Islamic State in Iraq*

The relationship between AQI and IS might best be described as a continual process of integration and merger between the original, non-Iraqi founders of AQI and various indigenous Sunni Arab networks that in the end totally incorporated what once had been known as AQI. For an overview of the backgrounds of the founders of AQI see Tables 1 and 2 at the end of the article.

After Zarqawi arrived in the camps of the Kurdish militant group Ansar al-Islam in 2002 in Iraqi Kurdistan together with some of his close companions from the Herat camp, he sowed the seeds of what was to first become known as *Tawhid wal-jihad* (TWJ) and from October 2004 as *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* (the al-Qaida Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers or Mesopotamia), most often referred to as al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI).[3] Through his capacity as head of a training camp in Herat designated for recruits from the Levant, Zarqawi had established networks in several of Iraq's neighboring countries, such as Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. These networks would prove effective in recruiting a number of the foreign fighters pouring into Iraq immediately before and after the invasion in 2003. But as will be illustrated below, there was also an important Iraqi contingent within TWJ/AQI.

Over time, the share of Iraqis within AQI increased, a process helped by events such as the killing of Zarqawi in June 2006 and the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq four months later. The death of Zarqawi was important because it deprived AQI of its charismatic leader and iconic founder. His successor Abu Ayyub al-Masri has been described both as less charismatic and less assertive, and as someone who failed to inspire the rank-and-file members of the group.[4] Growing internal discontent, combined with the increased rebel infighting following the establishment of ISI in October 2006, propelled some the non-Iraqi members of AQI to leave Iraq and instead help establish groups in other countries.[5] Studies of the Lebanese group known as Fatah al-Islam, for instance, have argued that former AQI members and other veterans who had left Iraq in disappointment were central in establishing the group.[6] One of those who left Iraq and AQI following the death of Zarqawi was reportedly Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, the current top leader of Jabhat al-Nusra. He left for Lebanon where he gave assistance to the jihadi group known as Jund al-Sham, but according to most accounts he returned to Iraq where he was arrested and joined ISI when he was released in 2008.[7] Another person who reportedly left Iraq after the death of Zarqawi was the Jordanian AQI veteran Mustafa Abd al-Latif Salih aka Abu Anas al-Sahhaha who in 2012 became one of Jabhat al-Nusra's leading commanders in southern Syria.[8]

In many respects the gradual Iraqification culminated in 2010 when counterterrorism operations removed almost the entire top leadership of ISI, including the Egyptian AQI-veteran Abu Ayyub al-Masri who succeeded Zarqawi as leader of AQI and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, the first leader of the Islamic State in Iraq.

Most observers agree that AQI formally ceased to exist in November 2006 when AQI leader Abu Ayyub al-Masri pledged allegiance to ISI leader Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and announced that AQI and all its members were to integrate into ISI.[9] AQI and its former leaders did, however, retain much influence within the new organization. AQI was after all the principal group behind the establishment of ISI and by far the most powerful of the founding groups. Several of the top leaders of ISI came from the ranks of AQI, such as Abu Ayyub al-Masri, who served as the so-called “war minister” of ISI from 2007 and from 2009 as “prime minister” (*al-wazir al-awwal*).[10] Some sources, including pro-IS ones, also suggest that the head of ISI, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, came from the ranks of AQI.[11] Also, other AQI veterans assumed senior positions within ISI, such as Abu Zahra’ al-‘Issawi who, according to his martyr biography, became ISI’s information minister in 2007.[12]

However, several of the leaders of the other co-founding insurgent groups also took important positions within ISI. For instance, Muharib Abdallah al-Juburi, the former leader of Saraya al-Ghuraba’ (Battalion of Strangers) was given the job as official spokesperson of ISI.[13] Abd al-Rahman al-Falahi, who served as the deputy of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and as ISI’s “prime minister” from 2007 to 2009, had been the leader of the group Saraya al-Jihad.[14]

The influence of AQI within ISI seems to have gradually diminished as the former AQI veterans were killed and replaced by new leaders with different pedigrees. Very few of the leaders who came in after 2010 seem to have been members of AQI. Some of them belonged to other insurgent groups that had joined ISI, often while being imprisoned together with AQI/ISI-members. For example, Abu Ali al-Anbari, one of the top leaders of IS and Baghdadi’s second-in-command in Syria, is reported to have joined Ansar al-Islam after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but was expelled from the group due to allegations of financial corruption.[15] Abu Yahya al-Iraqi, who replaced Haji Bakr following the latter’s death in February 2014, had reportedly been a member of the insurgent group known as the Islamic Army in Iraq, but had joined ISI while imprisoned in Camp Bucca.[16] Some sources also claim that current IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi came from a group known as Jama’at al-Jaysh Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama’a, one of the co-founding groups of ISI.[17]

Another important difference between AQI and the leadership of ISI is that, while the top leaders of AQI and ISI until 2010 were Afghan Arab veterans who had met and knew the leadership of al-Qaida, very few of the leaders after 2010 had. For an overview of the backgrounds of the ISI(S) top leadership between 2010 and 2014, see Table 3 below.

Many observers have commented on the apparent disagreements between Zarqawi and the top leadership of al-Qaida, who found Zarqawi too extreme and too willing to target both Shiite and Sunni civilians. However, it could be argued that the al-Qaida leadership and Zarqawi, at least initially, agreed to disagree and enjoyed a working relationship. Through his position as the head of a training camp in Herat established in cooperation with and supported by the al-Qaida leadership, Zarqawi was integrated into the wider al-Qaida network.[18] As will be illustrated below, these networks became crucial for facilitating Zarqawi’s stay in Iraq. Zarqawi’s successor, Abu Ayyub al-Masri had belonged to Zawahiri’s group Egyptian Islamic Jihad during the 1990s and he seems to have been close to Zawahiri in Afghanistan.[19] During his conflict with IS in 2013-2014, Zawahiri said the al-Qaida leadership had trusted Abu Umar al-Baghdadi because they had known him for a long time (although there is no information indicating that they ever met). In the same message, Zawahiri said that he and bin Laden never had heard about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi nor his second in command, Abu Sulayman Nasr li-Din Allah, when they became leaders of ISI in 2010.[20]

There are some important exceptions to this pattern. For instance, the current spokesman of IS, the Syrian Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, is, according to several sources, a veteran of AQI. A pro-IS biography claims

that Adnani was one of several Syrians who had pledged allegiance to Zarqawi “in the early 2000s”. He came to Iraq in 2003 and the biography presents several details concerning Adnani’s activity as part of TWJ/AQI in Iraq, although few of these details can be confirmed by other sources. Detractors and alleged ex-members of IS insist that Adnani and Zarqawi never met.[21] Regardless of when he joined the group, it seems that al-Adnani became spokesman of ISI sometime after the group’s decapitation in 2010. The first references to Adnani as spokesman for the group are from around 2011.[22]

Another important exception is Abu ‘Ala’ al-‘Afri, who is believed to have served as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s deputy following the latter’s injury in a U.S. airstrike in March 2015 until al-Afri allegedly was killed in May. According to several accounts, Abu Ala’ travelled to Afghanistan in 1998, although there is little information on his activity there. He reportedly pledged allegiance to Zarqawi in 2004 and was appointed to important positions such as Zarqawi’s deputy, as AQI’s emir of Mosul, and as AQI’s “liaison officer” to the al-Qaida leadership in Pakistan.[23]

Thus, Abu Ala’ al-Afri represents a link between AQI and IS. However, based on the scant information available, it would appear that he belonged to a pro-AQI and a pro-al-Qaida faction within ISI that was sidelined after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became leader of ISI. It has been claimed, for instance, that al-Afri was bin Laden’s preferred candidate to become the new leader of AQI. It has also been claimed that al-Afri was more open to reconciliation with Jabhat al-Nusra, IS’s Syrian breakaway faction and the official Syrian branch of al-Qaida.[24] Abu Ala’ al-Afri’s long experience and pedigree from AQI, combined with his alleged charisma would make him a top candidate for a leadership position in ISI post-2010 at a time when the group desperately was in need of qualified and experienced leaders. However, it seems that he was not given important positions right away, but had to work his way up through the ranks of the group. It has also been claimed that there were deep disagreements between him and elements within the group, and that he at some point was excluded from the group.[25] This could be explained by the fact that he was one of the few top leaders of ISI without a known military background and therefore did not belong to the “Baathist” networks dominating ISI since 2010.

There are also other indications that an internal power struggle followed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s ascension to the leadership. For instance, Jamal Hamdani, one of the few in ISI’s Shura Council who voted against the appointment of Baghdadi as the new leader, was reportedly later assassinated for his objections.[26] Alleged pro-Zawahiri elements within ISI reportedly instigated a rebellion against Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in late 2010. The rebellion was supposedly led by Abd al-Karim al-Jubouri, one of ISI’s leaders in Mosul. He and others who were opposed to Baghdadi either quit the organization or were liquidated by the pro-Baghdadi wing within ISI.[27] Accounts from alleged ex-ISI members also claim that the former Baathist officers who in 2010 became the dominating faction within ISI systematically sidelined or even killed the old non-Baathist veterans within ISI.[28]

### ***The role of AQI veterans within Jabhat al-Nusra***

It would appear that the establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra in 2011 to some extent formalized and exacerbated the split between the old AQI-generation within ISI and the new generation dominating ISI from 2010. In contrast to IS, several of the founding fathers of Jabhat al-Nusra seems to have been AQI veterans and former companions of Zarqawi. For instance, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, was reportedly close to Zarqawi and left Iraq following the latter’s death. He later returned to Iraq where he was arrested and imprisoned in Camp Bucca. After his release in 2008 he became responsible for the Mosul chapter of ISI, until he left for Syria in 2011 (on orders from Baghdadi) to establish what was to become



Jabhat al-Nusra.[29] Also Abu Anas al-Sahhaha who in 2012 became one of Jabhat al-Nusra's leading commanders in the southern regions of Syria (Dera'a), had been close to the original founders of AQI. [30] According to jihadi sources he had arrived with Abu Anas al-Shami, the Jordanian religious advisor to Zarqawi, and served as his assistant.[31]

Abu Anas al-Sahhaha's predecessor as Jabhat al-Nusra's emir of the southern areas was another long-time companion of Zarqawi, Iyad al-Tubaysi aka Abu Julaybib. Abu Julaybib was a veteran of Zarqawi's camp in Herat who had accompanied Zarqawi to Iraq. He was also a part of Zarqawi's close family through his marriage to one of Zarqawi's sisters.[32] There are few details about his role in Iraq, but he apparently stayed there for several years before he in 2011 was ordered by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to travel to Syria and help establish Jabhat al-Nusra.[33] Like Zarqawi, both Abu Anas al-Sahhaha and Abu Julaybib hail from the Jordanian town al-Zarqa.[34] There were also other members of Zarqawi's extended family who have been associated with Jabhat al-Nusra. For instance, Muhammad Yasin Jarad, Zarqawi's cousin and son of Yasin Jarad, who served as one of the trainers in the Herat camp, fought with Jabhat al-Nusra and was killed in January 2013.[35] For an overview of the backgrounds of the original founders of Jabhat al-Nusra, see Table 4 below.

In addition, several of the al-Qaida veterans who have played crucial roles within Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria seem to have had previous dealings with Zarqawi. For instance, Abu Firas al-Suri, an al-Qaeda veteran operating in Syria on behalf of Jabhat al-Nusra, cooperated with Zarqawi ahead of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 in order to establish a foothold for al-Qaida in the Levant.[36] Abu Humam al-Shami, yet another al-Qaida veteran affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra, stayed in Iraq for four months prior to the fall of Baghdad in 2003 and met with both Zarqawi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri. He later returned to Iraq after he was briefly arrested in Syria and became head of "the mujahidin service office" (*maktab khidamat al-mujahidin*) where Zarqawi's new recruits were trained.[37] Moreover, some of the leaders of the Syrian insurgent group known as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham might have belonged to AQI. For instance, the Ahrar al-Sham leader Abu Ayman al-Hamawi was according to Ahrar al-Sham and anti-IS sources a close companion of Zarqawi.[38]

One important exception is Abu Mariya al-Qahtani aka Maysar Abdalla al-Juburi. Compared to the other original founders of Jabhat al-Nusra (see Table 4), he stands out not only as an Iraqi but also due to his alleged membership in Saddam Hussein's Fida'iyin. He seems to have been highly critical of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's leadership and staunchly opposed to the merger between ISI(S) and Jabhat al-Nusra. It is however not entirely clear if he joined Jabhat al-Nusra due to disagreements with al-Baghdadi or if he mainly was critical of how al-Baghdadi/ISI treated Jabhat al-Nusra.[39]

### ***The role of former officers in AQI and in IS***

The two most common patterns in the profiles of the post-2010 leadership of ISI is their background as former officers and/or Baath officials and as former inmates of the U.S-run prisons in Iraq. This does not necessarily imply, however, that they can be described as agents of Saddam Hussein and the Baath party.

First of all, former Iraqi officers already played important roles, not only within IS, but also within AQI and its predecessor Tawhid wal-Jihad (TWJ). Primary sources issued by AQI suggest that most of these former officers belonged to a Salafi undercurrent that emerged in Iraq during the 1980s and especially in the 1990s due to the so-called "Faith Campaign" (*al-hamla al-imaniyya*) initiated by Saddam Hussein. This campaign influenced the Baath party itself and several studies have concluded that the regime turned increasingly Islamic during the 1990s.[40] Although the Faith Campaign partly was intended to contain the dawning Salafi trend in Iraq, the 1990s witnessed an increased influence from Salafism, especially within the armed

forces. As the regime tried to curb the rise of a Salafist movement and arrested several Salafi adherents, this trend mainly operated underground and clandestinely.[41]

According to primary sources from AQI, several of their Iraqi founding fathers belonged to this clandestine Salafi trend within the Iraqi army and were allegedly persecuted by the regime of Saddam Hussein due to their Salafi beliefs. For instance, according to the martyr biography of Abu Talha al-Mawsuli, who became AQI's emir of Mosul and of northern Iraq, had become influenced by Salafism in 1997-98 while serving as a part of Hussein's Special Republican Guard.[42] Abu Maysara al-Iraqi, who served as spokesman both for TWJ and AQI, was a former officer who had established a clandestine group during the rule of Saddam Hussein.[43] Umar Hadid, who in 2004 would become crucial for facilitating AQI's presence in Fallujah, had belonged to a violent Salafi group active in Fallujah during the 1990s.[44] Some accounts indicate that Hadid had served in Saddam Hussein's Special Republican Guard until 1994, but it is difficult to verify this claim.[45] Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, the first leader of ISI (2006-2010), seems to have a similar background. Although there has been much confusion concerning his identity, most accounts agree that his real name was Hamid Dawud Khalil al-Zawi. According to some sources, including pro-IS ones, al-Zawi was an officer in the Iraqi army who either left or was dismissed from the army after joining an Iraqi Salafi group in 1985 and becoming a leading figure within the Iraqi Salafi community.[46]

Thus, one similarity between AQI and IS is that former officers had prominent roles within both organizations. However, an important difference seems to be that while the former officers of AQI left or were dismissed from the Iraqi army *prior* to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the former officers of IS seems to have remained in their positions until the old Iraqi army was dissolved following the invasion. And at least according to anti-IS sources, few, if any, of the current IS leadership belonged to the Iraqi Salafi community or were particularly religious.[47] Several of the top ISI leaders after 2010 such as Abu Ali al-Anbari, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, Muhammad al-Nada al-Juburi, Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, and Abu Faysal al-Zayidi have been described as former officers and/or Baath officials. According to several accounts, including confiscated internal IS-document, it was Haji Bakr, a former Colonel in the Iraqi Revolutionary Guard and former Baathist, who—after the death of the previous ISI-leaders in 2010—promoted several ex-Baathist to leadership positions and reorganized ISI along a Baathist model.[48]

In addition, after the fall of the former regime in 2003, there were several reports of an alleged marriage of convenience between Baathists and militant Islamists belonging to al-Qaida.[49] Although there were important ideological disagreements between Baathists and al-Qaida, tactical cooperation is conceivable given their common goal of destabilizing and removing the new U.S.-installed regime in Iraq.[50] Few studies have presented concrete evidence on this cooperation, however, except for some claims such as an alleged meeting between Zarqawi and Iraq's former vice-president 'Izzat al-Douri in June 2004, where al-Douri reportedly swore obedience to Zarqawi.[51] In addition, the history of the relationship between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida reveals a mutual distrust of each other. Almost all postwar studies from U.S. government institutions concerning the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaida have concluded that the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaida was limited or non-existent.[52] In August 2002, after Saddam had been made aware of the presence of foreign Islamists in Iraq, he ordered his intelligence chiefs to find them as he feared the danger these foreigners could pose.[53] This mutual distrust seems to have continued after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, and according to a document found after the capture of Saddam Hussein he warned Iraqis against cooperating with the jihadists and the foreign Arabs as they had a different agenda than the Baathists.[54] Likewise, incipient members of AQI warned the Arab volunteers from fighting on behalf of the "infidel" Saddam Hussein and his regime.[55]

However, as mentioned above, the Baath party itself had been influenced by Islam during the decade prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and many of the former officers and Baath-members were central in the formation of Islamic motivated insurgent groups in the wake of the collapse of the old regime, such as the Islamic Army in Iraq (*Jaysh al-Islami fi 'l- 'Iraq*) and the 1920 Revolution Brigades (*Kata'ib Thawrat al- 'Ashrin*).

It is also important to distinguish between those former regime elements who still could be described as unreformed Baathist and those who had been part of the regime or the armed forces, but not necessarily adhered to the ideology of Baathism or who fought for the return of the Baath party. It is, after all, 12 years since the fall of the Iraqi Baath regime, and both Iraq and Syria have gone through dramatic changes during these years. For those who are still motivated by Baathism, it would make more sense to join the group known as the Men of the Army of the al-Naqshbandia Order (*Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandiyah*) or JRTN. The group has been described as the “de facto armed wing of the Baath party”[56], but the ideology of the group has been described as a mixture of Baathism, pan-Arabism, and Islam.[57] Until recent reports on his death, this group was led by Iraq’s former vice-president ‘Izzat al-Douri who was both a well-known Sufi leader and charged by Saddam Hussein to lead the Faith Campaign during the 1990s. However, due to his Sufi background he was not in favor of the rise of Salafism that the Faith Campaign resulted in, and he instead promoted a “Sufi network” within the Baath party and the armed forces.[58] As recently pointed out by Aymenn al-Tamimi, there has been more of a competition between JRTN and IS in order to be the dominating Sunni Arab insurgent group in Iraq than a “marriage of convenience”.[59] Thus, even if one accepts the argument that IS is dominated by former Baathists and former Iraqi officers, it is still difficult to argue that IS is the “Baath party resurgent”. If anything, it could be argued that they represent only a segment within a multifaceted organization, if representative of the Baath party at all.

Another common denominator among the top leaders of IS is that several of them were held in U.S-led prisons such as Camp Bucca. Prisons have traditionally been an effective area of recruitment for AQI/IS.[60] AQI members, petty criminals, and other insurgents were often detained together and were given a large degree of self-rule within the prisons. Despite only constituting a small minority, the hardcore extremists were often in a position to dominate and to intimidate the other inmates.[61] Several of the former Baathist were reportedly influenced by the ideology of AQI/ISI in prison. This, in combination with a shared enmity toward the Shiite-dominated regime of Nuri al-Maliki, may have facilitated cooperation and integration of AQI members, former Baathists and other incarcerated insurgents. The prisons may have served as a melting pot from where the current incarnation of the Islamic state emerged. When several of the inmates escaped or were released, they rebuilt ISI – by a mix of a Baathist-inspired organization and a jihadi-inspired ideology. [62]

### **Conclusion**

Despite the apparent historical continuity between AQI and IS, the background and networks of the respective leaderships differ. Jabhat al-Nusra appears to be connected to some of same regional networks that established AQI, while IS is more of an extension of the *Iraqi* faction within AQI and within other indigenous networks like the Baath party and other insurgent groups. With some important exceptions, like Umar al-Shishani, few of the many foreign fighters who have joined the group since it announced its presence in Syria in 2013, have risen to the top tier of IS. However, the focus in this article has been on the top leadership of ISI(S) from 2010 to 2014, prior to the declaration of the Islamic state and the caliphate in June 2014 and the international offensive against the group. Several of the top leaders have been killed during the last year, and thus replaced with yet a new generation of leaders where IS’ foreign veterans most likely will increase their

influence. It has for instance been reported that foreign leaders, like the Saudi Badr al-Shaalan, the Tunisian Tariq bin al-Tahar bin al-Falih al-Awni al-Harzi and Turki ibn Mubarak al-Bin ‘ali from Bahrain have recently gained importance within IS.[63]

One interesting implication of these findings is that local leadership does not necessarily result in a local strategy. Although the leadership of IS has been dominated by Iraqis without prior experience from other conflict areas, and while several of the top leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra belong to the old networks associated with al-Qaida and AQI, it is IS which has taken the more transnational and expansive approach. Jabhat al-Nusra has followed a somewhat more cautious and local strategy, aiming to gradually increase their influence in Syria without clearly specifying a regional or global strategy beyond Syria. On the other hand, given Jabhat al-Nusra’s strong connections to al-Qaida and associated networks and their recent success in gaining strength and local allies in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra may represent a potent and long-term international threat.

Table 1: AQI members included in the series “From the Biographies of the Distinguished Martyrs”[64]

Name	Nationality	Former Baath	Relation to Zarqawi	Afghan veteran
Abu Usama al-Maghribi	Moroccan			
Abu Huraira al-Hijazi	Saudi			
Abu Umayr al-Suri al-Halabi	Syrian			
Al-Haji Thamer Atrous	Iraqi	X		
Abu Hamza al-Urduni	Jordanian		X	X
Sayf al-Umma	Saudi			X
Abu Tariq al-Yamani	Yemen			
Abu Khabbab al-Filastini	Palestinian			X
Abu Omar al-Masri	Egyptian			X
Abu Sulayman al-Filastini	Palestinian			
Al-Hazbar al-Nahdi	Saudi			
Abu Abdallah al-Turki	Turkish		(X)	X
Abu Khalid al-Suri	Syrian/Palestinian			
Umar Hadid	Iraqi	X	X	(X)
Abu Faris al-Ansari	Iraqi	X		
Julaybib Al-Muhajir	Saudi		X	
Abu Basir al-Emirati	Emirates			
Abu al-Hur al-Ansari	Iraqi			
Abu Turab al-Najdi	Saudi			
Abu Hamza al-Shami	Syrian		X	X
Abu Nasr	Egyptian			
Abu Nasir al-Libi	Libyan		X	
Abu Abdallah al-Shami	Syrian		X	X
Abu Muhammad al-Jaza'iri	Algerian			
Abu al-Ghadiya/ Sulayman Khalid Darwish	Syrian		X	X
Abu Ja'far al-Maqdisi	Lebanese		X	
Tariq al-Wahsh	Iraqi	(X)	X	
Abu Radwan al-Tunisi	Tunisian			
Abu Maridyah al-Yamani	Yemeni			
Abu Turab al-Libi	Libyan			
Abu Tariq al-Tunisi	Tunisian			

Aqil al-Masri	Egyptian		X	
Abu Dujanah al-Yamani	Yemeni			
Abu Ubaidah Al Makki	Saudi			
Abu Ayyub al-Iraqi	Iraqi			
Abu Azzam al-Iraqi	Iraqi		X	
Abu Anas al-Shami	Jordanian		X	X
Abu Usama al-Tunisi	Tunisian		X	
Abu Anas al-Tuhami	Yemeni			
Abdallah al-Salih	Saudi			
Abu Hassan al-San'ani	Yemeni			
Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi	Iraqi	X	X	
Abu Zahra' al-'Issawi	Iraqi		X	
Abu Thabit al-Shami	Palestinian/ Syrian		X	

Table 2: Other top leaders of TWJ and AQI (2003-2006)

Name	Nationality	Former Baath	Relation to Zarqawi	Afghan-veteran
Abu Musab al-Zarqawi	Jordanian		X	X
Abu Ayyub al-Masri	Egyptian		X	X
Abu Talha al-Mawsili	Iraqi	X	X	
Abu Maysarah al-Gharib	Syrian		X	
Abu Muhammad al-Lubnani	Lebanese		X	(X)

Table 3: Top leadership of ISI(S) 2010-2014 [65]

Name	Nationality	Former Baath	Relation to Zarqawi	Afghan-veteran
Abu Muslim al-Turkmani	Iraqi (Turkmen)	X		
Abu Muhammad al-Adnani	Syrian		X	
Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	Iraqi			
Haji Bakr/Abu Bakr al-Iraqi	Iraqi	X		
Abu Ala' al-Afri	Iraqi (Turkmen)		X	X
Abu Ali al-Anbari	Iraqi (Turkmen)	X		
Muhammad al-Nada al-Juburi	Iraqi	X		
Abu Ayman al-Iraqi	Iraqi	X		
Abu Ahmad al-Alwani	Iraqi	X		
Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi	Iraqi	(X)	X	
Nasir al-Din Allah Abu Sulayman	(Non-Iraqi)			(X)
(Abu Faysal al-Zayidi)	Iraqi	X		
Abu Umar al-Shishani	Georgian/Chechen			



Table 4: Original founders of Jabhat al-Nusra (2011-2012)

Name	Nationality	Former Baath	Relation to Zarqawi	Afghan-veteran
Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani	Syrian		(X)	
Abu Mariya al-Qahtani	Iraqi	X		
Abu Anas al-Sahhaba	Jordanian		X	
Iyad al-Tubaysi	Jordanian		X	X
(Abd al-Aziz al-Qatari)	(Iraqi)		(X)	(X)

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### Notes

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[65] Only those leaders who have been confirmed as belonging to the top echelon of the group have been included. Regional and local leaders have not been included.

## The Metronome of Apocalyptic Time: Social Media as Carrier Wave for Millenarian Contagion

by J.M. Berger

### *Abstract*

*The Islamic State uses social media to activate a sense of “apocalyptic time” among its supporters online. Key elements of this campaign include instilling a sense of temporal acceleration and imminent arrival of end-times scenarios, leveraging the dynamics of social contagion and remote intimacy on beliefs that have an inherently viral appeal, and providing a vehicle for supporters outside its territories to immerse themselves in a highly idealized version of its millenarian project, the so-called caliphate. The Islamic State is the first group to employ these amplifying tactics on social media at an industrial scale, but it will likely not be the last.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, ISIS, Internet, millenarianism, apocalypticism, social media

### *Introduction*

The Islamic State, also known as ISIS, is a hybrid organization with many facets, one of the challenges we face in understanding and countering its actions. While there are clear political dimensions to this phenomenon, ISIS has an equally clear apocalyptic and millenarian bent, both as a social movement and an organization. While its prominence varies in different aspects of the organization, it is especially prominent in ISIS’s online messaging and social media activity.

The newest generation of electronic social media is an important tool in ISIS’s call to action, relative to both foreign fighter recruitment and the encouragement of so-called “lone wolf” terrorist attacks. New technology offers significant new complications in dealing with the age-old problem of apocalyptic movements and their radically destructive potential.

For purposes of this discussion, which is intended as a preliminary stage-setting exploration of how these themes synergize with the use of new technologies, I will employ the following terms and definitions:

**Apocalyptic:** Concerned with the imminent end or complete and radical transformation of the world, and signs and portents thereof.

**Millenarian:** Concerned with the creation of a perfect society that will transform the world and establish a utopian reign on earth, generally for a set period of time prior to the end of the world or the end of a set age of linear history.

A legitimate debate endures over whether the leaders of ISIS are true believers, or whether they are employing apocalyptic ideas instrumentally. At this time, it is not possible to answer that question with great certainty. It is more clear that, at the footsoldier level, a significant number of adherents to ISIS’s program believe in its apocalyptic aspects, and that these are one important component of its multifaceted appeal.

Questions regarding the beliefs of leaders are significant, particularly with respect to what ISIS leaders will do in the face of an existential challenge, but they do not change how the organization operates in terms of recruitment and messaging. Here, at least, we can draw relatively clear conclusions.

ISIS presents itself to adherents and adversaries alike as an apocalyptic sect, through clear and repeated reference to end times prophecy, and as a millenarian movement, through its consistent characterization of



its “caliphate” as an idealized society foretold by prophecy and destined to take part in a historically final war against non-Muslims. This is widely supported both by its messaging and propaganda, the statements of its adherents on social media, and interviews with ISIS members by the media.[1]

ISIS social media amplifies apocalyptic and millenarian memes and instills a sense of urgency in would-be adherents using methods that will be detailed below. Those who believe that the world is ending may be prone to act on that belief and this can potentially complicate efforts to dissuade or rehabilitate them. More directly, the apocalyptic dimension of ISIS is pragmatically significant for a number of reasons:

1. Apocalyptic beliefs have historically been understood as viral, or more specifically contagious. They have a tendency to spread swiftly through well-defined social networks.[2]
2. The most committed apocalyptic believers (those filled with a sense of imminence, discussed below) can be extremely fanatical, with a high tolerance for violence and heightened will to act.[3]
3. Apocalyptic believers are frequently unwilling to abandon their beliefs in the face of contradictory evidence and may become even more committed (and potentially violent) when their movement is faced with setbacks.[4]

All of these traits are important in characterizing the threat of ISIS, both as a magnet for foreign fighters and as inspiration to individual or loosely guided acts of terrorism. In both respects, ISIS is now far outperforming its predecessor, al Qaeda,[5] thanks in significant part to its success at using social media.

Richard Landes, writing in *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience*, describes some of the critical elements required to activate “apocalyptic time,” a experiential phenomenon that ignites the fervor of believers and helps millenarian movements achieve critical mass and distinguishes them from movements that are simply eschatological (i.e., concerned with the end of history *at some point in the future*):

*Revolutionary ideologies only begin to appeal to large numbers (i.e., the meme only spreads widely) when people feel themselves close to the moment of transformation. ... These voluntary apocalyptic communities are temporal hothouses, brief moments when a self-selecting group of strangers comes together in circumstances where all “normal existence” ceases and a series of interlocking and energizing paradoxes come to life. ... The shorter the temporal horizon, the more intense the apocalyptic expectations become.[6]*

Within this framework, social media has inherent utility to amplify and facilitate the transmission and inculcation of apocalyptic beliefs through three key mechanisms:

1. Temporal compression: A belief that prophesied events preceding or accompanying the end of history are imminent or already underway, and that the clock is literally running out. Social media helps accomplish this through the pace of postings and updates relative to older forms of media.
2. Social contagion: Intense social contact and prolonged interaction spreads apocalyptic memes in an impactful, life-changing manner. Social media empowers such contact over wide geographical areas and also makes contact with potentially violent people safer for the curious.
3. Immersion: The diminishment and eventual replacement of normal existence with a heightened experience of an alternate interpretation of reality. This is achieved through both the volume of ISIS’s media output, combined with the always-on transmission of that output online, and its content.

The following section elaborates on each of these mechanisms.

*Temporal acceleration*

*“But can we trust him?” he said.*

*“Myself, I’d trust him to the end of the Earth,” said Ford.*

*“Oh yes,” said Arthur, “and how far’s that?”*

*“About twelve minutes away,” said Ford, “come on, I need a drink.”*

— Douglas Adams[7]

For an apocalyptic movement to take hold among a significant number of adherents, a sense of imminence is first required. Without imminence, such beliefs are merely eschatological. The apocalyptic herald cries “The end of the world is nigh!” not “The world will eventually end” (a point on which most people can agree in principle, even if they differ on the details). Hanging over every apocalyptic movement is a ticking clock, counting down the seconds until the End.

ISIS conveys and reinforces this sense of urgency with a remarkably high pace of media creation and dissemination. The pace only accelerates as ISIS gains territory and establishes branches around the world, each of which includes a media-generating division. From April 24 to May 24, 2015, ISIS distributed a minimum of 250 pieces of propaganda, using the most conservative criteria.[8] By comparison, al Qaeda has been almost completely silent since late 2014, and for years prior, its releases have only been sporadic since a burst of activity that followed the start of the Arab Spring.[9]

On social media, ISIS’s pace of output is even more remarkable. Although ISIS employs every social media platform for its propaganda and recruitment purposes, the best large-scale data on its tactics is derived from Twitter, due to data availability and the platform’s relatively transparent structure.

The pace of posting on Twitter serves as a kind of metronome. By following even a modest number of ISIS supporters online, an individual can receive thousands of messages per day, describing and celebrating the latest accomplishments being promoted by ISIS. When especially significant developments occur, the pace of posting accelerates, stepping up the intensity of the viewing experience. Deceleration occurs after such events, and account suspensions also limit the growth of the dissemination network, but the pace of output never approaches zero.

The average ISIS supporter on Twitter is far more active on Twitter than the average user of the platform overall. In addition to higher averages across the board, ISIS employs activists specifically for the purpose of flooding the Internet with content at a high pace, with such activism representing about 10 percent of overall activity from October to November 2014. Nearly 8 percent of sampled ISIS supporters tweeted more than 50 times per day, and almost 3 percent tweeted more than 150 times per day. Part of a coordinated effort, these accounts serve as pace-setters and can shape overall activity in the network.[10]

Thanks to the overall volume of activity, a sense of imminence is easy to achieve. Those who are attracted to ISIS can log onto social media at any time of the day or night, secure in the knowledge something momentous will be happening.

After the name of ISIS itself, the next most common hashtag used by members of the sample was “urgent,” a heightening term. There are frequent references to apocalyptic prophecies and themes, including references to al-Malhama (an apocalyptic battle loosely akin to Armageddon in the Christian tradition); Dabiq, a Syrian town currently controlled by ISIS where a key End Times battle is prophesied; and the Dajjal, an eschatological figure comparable to the Antichrist.[11]

ISIS supporters on Twitter included a link to external media in approximately one out of every 2.5 tweets. [12] A very substantial amount of this external media is produced by ISIS itself, including communiques and news broadcasts, and imagery, consisting of military footage and civil society content in roughly equal proportions.

The volume of original content produced allows ISIS activists to provide significant variety and creates a sense that the organization is constantly in motion. This sense also reflects ISIS's actual pace of real-world operations, which is similarly frenetic. In addition to the steady flow of new content, discussed further below, social media supporters also frequently post links to previously distributed material.

### **Social contagion**

*If you'd come today, you could have reached a whole nation.*

*Israel in 4 B.C. had no mass communication.*

— *Jesus Christ Superstar*[13]

For an apocalyptic movement to grow, potential recruits must be exposed both to its message and to social contact with adherents. Historically, these requirements have exerted a limiting effect on growth, based primarily on geographic reach.

This limit is not absolute, but it is significant. For instance, early Christianity had a strong apocalyptic component that helped fuel remarkably rapid growth over a wide geographic area. Nevertheless, its growth is measured in decades and centuries, during which time its apocalyptic tone evolved and mellowed.[14]

The apocalyptic ideology of ISIS has spread globally in mere months. The most significant factors empowering this speed are technological – the vastly increased mobility allowed by modern transportation, and the rise of socially networked global communities via cheap, instantaneous and easy-to-use communication technologies.

Apocalyptic rhetoric has long been associated with social contagion.[15] The idea of social contagion among apocalyptic and millenarian believers has a long history. References to the “contagion” of Christianity can be found in Roman writings of the second century CE.[16] In 1917, a Methodist minister bemoaned the “contagion” of millenarianism in his day, saying “no serum has yet been discovered that seems potent enough to stay it.”[17] As a caveat, the terminology may at times reflect the biases of those reporting (establishment speakers baffled or threatened by the appeal of a new religion), and the term is often used with extremism writ large.

To date, several studies have attempted to capture a magic formula pointing to which ideas will become contagious (or “viral”) and which will not, with few conclusive and replicable results. Elements of excitement (related to imminence) may play a role, as well as ideas which transgress mainstream boundaries of belief in one way or another. For instance, some particular scandal stories generate more viral activity than straight news, even though straight news performs more reliably over time.

A promising line of inquiry looks at the structural features of a social network, for instance the density of connections or the number of connected components, metrics for which ISIS registers strong scores.[18] It is possible that the social network structures of people vulnerable to extremist or apocalyptic beliefs may be structurally suited in some way to mesh with networks that are apt to facilitate the transmission of such ideas, but this has not yet been studied in a quantifiable way.

Regardless, social contagion does play some role in the spread of apocalyptic ideologies, and not just among adherents. Contagion can also spread to antagonists, i.e., those who perceive the millenarian group as an existential threat or as the fulfilment of their own eschatological expectations, creating a vicious circle of reinforcement.

This further undermines any ‘sober’ discourse, and, under some rare conditions, can cause the conflict to metastasize far beyond its initial cultural matrix,” Landes writes.[19] Similarly, Barkun warns that “the millenarians and the state possess mirror images of each other. These images are important because they have behavioral consequences.” He argues that these images are overly simplified, “systematic and symmetrical misreadings” that “can powerfully affect group activation and violence.”[20]

Studies have suggested the efficacy of social media in facilitating social contagion,[21] and most people can turn to anecdotal observation of “viral” phenomena to viscerally understand the speed with which memes can spread in the information age.[22]

The speed of contagion may have an amplifying effect on the contagion itself, contributing to temporal compression, as people marvel at an apocalyptic movement that they perceive “came out of nowhere” and antagonists react with disproportionate alarm, effects that can easily be seen in popular reactions to the rise of ISIS in 2014 and early 2015. Such reactions fuel curiosity about the movement and ultimately expand the reach of its messaging.[23]

Despite all the complexities detailed above, the core concept is relatively simple. Social contagion is the spread of memes or ideas through personal contact, and social media enables high levels of personal contact across wide geographies without the loss of intimacy that once attended such great distances.

### ***Mediated Discovery***

New information technologies, such as the printing press or shortwave radio, can find early adopters among apocalyptic movements.[24] However such technologies are not equally impactful. The telegraph and telephone enabled instant communication over distances, but they did not enable community discovery. The printing press and shortwave enabled community discovery, but not peer-to-peer communication.

Social media combines these two vectors to powerful effect. Social media platforms are designed for broadcasting content, enabling group conversations, and sharing information, in the form of pictures, audio, video and links to articles. New social media users seek out sources of information reflecting their interests and also share information about themselves. This process puts them in contact with like-minded others, allowing peer-to-peer conversations about the content to take place.

These shared interests allow users to quickly form focused communities. In most cases, the orientation of these communities is innocuous — a school, a shared professional interest, or a favorite television show. Most people have multiple interests, and therefore their social networks may not be especially cohesive or insular. In fact, their exposure to diverse sources of information over social media likely helps inoculate them against extremism.[25]

For people who are inclined toward, or vulnerable to, extremist or apocalyptic beliefs, social media offers a host of enabling technologies to discover other like-minded individuals, some of whom are recruiters, ready to respond quickly and even using the same discovery technologies to hunt for recruits. One of the few reliable indicators of who will become a violent extremist is who you know. The people most likely to become violent extremists are those who are friends of violent extremists.[26]

Social media makes it possible to know more people, to know people who are not in physical proximity, and to find and meet people who share your interests, no matter how fringe those interests might be.

In addition to organic factors that arise from information-sharing, machine mediation also plays a role in facilitating social contagion. Major social networks invest significant resources in facilitating connections among users. These can take different forms.

On Twitter, for instance, the “who to follow” function recommends accounts that are similar to accounts a user already follows. If a user follows some ISIS supporters, Twitter will recommend more.[27] Facebook offers lists of “people you may know.” Both services will repeatedly recommend new accounts to connect with via email, unless that setting is explicitly disabled, and in sidebars on their respective web pages, which cannot be disabled.

As a result, users who react to online personalities or content may find themselves steered into more ideological social circles, even if that was not their original intent or interest. Tracked over time, the performance of Twitter recommendation algorithms was seen to decline as suspensions of extremist accounts and content increased. While relevant material was still recommended, it was less directly related to ISIS and included more noise. Similarly, on YouTube, related video recommendations were impacted significantly by the swift removal of ISIS propaganda. The risk of machine-mediated radicalization is mitigated by these steps, but not fully eliminated.[28]

### *Remote Intimacy*

In the real world, the search for like-minded radicals is fraught with risks, from social and professional stigma to legal consequences to physical violence. Social media allows individuals to explore radical, extremist and apocalyptic ideas in a much safer environment through functional anonymity.[29] Aside from the well-known disinhibiting effects of anonymity online,[30] social media removes the imminent physical risk involved with speaking to a person who is potentially or proven violent, or who adheres to an extreme or violent ideology.

Despite the distance and lack of physical contact that create this safe zone for conversation, it is possible to forge very strong bonds of intimacy online. As the technology migrates from computers to phones, many social media users are “always on,” a trait which ISIS courts with its overwhelmingly active online presence.

Users who interact every day or multiple times a day can develop a sense of “remote intimacy,” even when separated by great distances.[31]

ISIS recruiters targeting the West exploit this dynamic aggressively with direct outreach by foreign fighters based in Syria. This personalized outreach can take on a very explicitly apocalyptic tenor.

Of particular interest to this conversation, one user tweeting in English and Arabic identifies his Twitter account using the name “End of Time Dreams” and serves as a broker between dreamers and allegedly authoritative third parties (more numerous and tweeting in Arabic) who interpret those dreams with a pro-ISIS bent.

Significantly, “End of Time Dreams” conversed over Twitter with Elton Simpson, one of two Americans who attacked a “Draw the Prophet Mohammed” contest in Garland, Texas. While a complete record of the exchange was unavailable, due to Simpson’s account having been suspended, it appeared “End of Time



Dreams” arranged for a dream to be interpreted at Simpson’s request several days before the attack took place. [32]

### **Immersion**

*Whoever controls the media, controls the mind.*

— Jim Morrison[33]

The third major element in the activation of “apocalyptic time” is immersion, under which the “self-selecting group of strangers comes together in circumstances where all ‘normal existence’ ceases.”[34]

High-volume social media activity and remote intimacy combine to create a dynamic in which immersion in apocalyptic time can occur. The final necessary component is content that depicts a virtual space (i.e., the caliphate) for adherents to share.

ISIS accomplishes this through the use of voluminous rich media, including photos and video. From April 24 to May 24, 2015, official ISIS sources disseminated at least 250 pieces of original media, including text, photos, audio and video, using a conservative methodology to identify content. Official images are also supplemented by photos uploaded by individual users or media workers in ISIS territory, who will at times provide additional details about the events depicted.

Content officially disseminated by ISIS during the period broke down into three roughly equal categories: 1) news and communiqués, 2) reports on military operations, and 3) documentation of civil society in ISIS-controlled territories.[35]

The first category included messages from ISIS leadership, but the most frequent content consisted of regular audio news broadcasts, which were also broadcast over radio stations in ISIS-controlled territories. It should be noted that these were skewed toward military reporting.[36]

The second category, military operations, takes a variety of forms. While battle footage has long been part of jihadi propaganda, ISIS uses immersive techniques to draw viewers in, including digital enhancement of high-definition footage and first-person GoPro video filmed from behind the barrel of a gun, similar to highly immersive “first-person shooter” video games.[37]

Perhaps the most important content falls into the third category, depictions of civil society. Here, the millenarian aspect of the ISIS project can be seen in full flower, as it transmits carefully chosen images designed to depict a demented kind of utopia, where harsh, ultraviolet “justice” alternates with pastoral idylls and a full-service government.

These scenes included the hanging of flags around ISIS’s Tigris province (located between Mosul and Anbar in Iraq), the presentation of a soccer ball to children in its Euphrates province (on the border between Iraq and Syria), and children at play in Kirkuk, among many others. Images of markets overflowing with food are also common. Photos of the ISIS black flag flying over a field of pink or purple flowers are particularly popular, with some Twitter users employing them on their profile pages.

Law and order features heavily in ISIS’s civil society content, with images of police officers, traffic controllers and a significant number of public executions, including for sorcery, adultery and homosexuality.

In some ways, this virtual “caliphate” is arguably more compelling than living the real thing, since its auteurs have the option of staging its storyline carefully and omitting anything negative. A series of videos have

featured immigrants to the Islamic State testifying to the comfort and ease of their lives and urging viewers to join them.

Most apocalyptic cults only hope for the imminent arrival of their perfect, world-transforming society, although they will often attempt to model that society in their own closed communities. ISIS creates the impression it has already arrived, and adherents can immerse themselves in its details, thanks to these carefully mediated images and descriptions, which are broadcast around the world with little constraint.

### **Conclusion**

While not the exclusive source of ISIS's appeal, the apocalyptic strain is an important one, repeatedly highlighted in its messaging and echoed by its adherents in interviews with the media.[38]

The chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey, has characterized the group as employing "an apocalyptic, end-of-days strategic vision." [39] More on point, scholar Cole Bunzel, who has studied texts used by the explicitly apocalyptic Islamic movement responsible for the 1979 Meccan Rebellion, argues that ISIS draws inspiration from the same theological background. According to Bunzel, the leader of the 1979 movement, Juhayman al Otaibi, has been cited by ISIS scholars and is often referenced by ISIS adherents on social media.

Language used by ISIS to describe its caliphate also invokes hadith that make clear it sees the institution as the fulfilment of an eschatological prophecy regarding the state that will arise prior to the end of history.[40] Individual ISIS supporters online also quote prophecy in relation to strategic decisions made by ISIS.[41]

In a monitored list of 329 English-language accounts targeted by active ISIS recruiters, the "End of Times Dreams" account cited previously was the second-most influential, based on a weighted count of interactions. Although the sample may be influenced by the methods used to select members of the set, that method was based on observed interactions by users who took material steps to participate in ISIS activities.[42]

ISIS has developed a program on social media to advance its appeal as an apocalyptic millenarian movement, with the intention of furthering its objectives of increased migration to ISIS territories, foreign fighter recruitment and retention, and the inspiration of terrorist attacks outside the regions it controls.

Millenarian beliefs can take root in political situations that leave people socially unmoored, including local political or sectarian strife, economic displacement, humanitarian disaster, and other such disruptive social changes, as noted by Norman Cohn in his study of medieval Christian millenarian groups.[43] In this sense, ISIS's apocalyptic millenarian tendencies could be seen as a device (whether sincere or manipulative) to tap into diverse political and social streams of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, using a template that is not tied to a particular geographical or political situation, but rather to upheaval.

Social media may be particularly hospitable to the rise of millenarian and apocalyptic ideologies, given the traits discussed above, but ISIS's highly systematic presence online and large bricks-and-mortar establishment tend to obscure the picture. Some of the techniques ISIS employs have wider utility for extremist groups of all stripes. However, the combination of temporal acceleration, social contagion and immersion forms a powerful set of enabling mechanisms for its millenarian message.

While ISIS represents the first significant deployment of modern social media for this purpose, it surely will not be the last. Some movements may consciously emulate the ISIS model, but social media may also be organically suited to advancing extremist indoctrination among vulnerable audiences. Its format and

length limitations lend themselves structurally to the simplification of narratives, and the always-on mobile technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century allows for a continuous connection to others who share the same extremist views, providing reinforcement and personal validation.

Adherents can, through self-selection and mediated selection, easily create and immerse in information streams that entirely reinforce their beliefs, organically excluding contradictory data and dissenting voices.

While social media use does seem to have a moderating effect on most people, by providing access to diverse communities and information sources, it also empowers self-segregation by those who are already vulnerable to extremist ideas and fringe beliefs.

Such movements can achieve critical mass by quickly attracting hundreds or thousands of adherents who can take part in coordinated action and may additionally avail themselves of easy transportation in order to congregate in physical spaces.

These factors empower such groups to have a disproportionate impact on national and global societies, far in excess of their relatively marginal numbers. Even ISIS, one of the largest extremist movements in recent memory, still commands a following that is only a fraction of 1 percent of the worldwide Muslim population it seeks to recruit. Yet ISIS has emerged as one of the most politically pressing problems of the day, in addition to its ability to wreak physical destruction and horrific violence in specific locales.

Social media analytics offer the opportunity for additional study that could shed light on the quantifiable utility of social media specifically to apocalyptic and millenarian strains; however, there are many challenges for such research. ISIS's systematic strategy online may not be usefully comparable to equivalent non-apocalyptic social movements that rely on more organic factors. And social movements are highly dependent on political and cultural factors that can complicate longitudinal study.

Nevertheless, preliminary approaches to this question could prove illuminating. By identifying online communities organized around ideologies or social movements, it is possible to measure the rate of transmission and pace of engagement, growth in the size of the network, network structural characteristics that aid or impede transmission, and other metrics that could be usefully compared.

Further research could shed light on both the fundamental qualities currently associated with apocalyptic movements (for instance, by quantifying contagion or disengagement rates) and the differences among various types of extremist groups and ideologies.

Perhaps more importantly, such research could highlight the differences between apocalyptic or extremist network activity and more mainstream social movements, such as the Arab Spring, which produced a massive and world-changing spike in activity online but largely failed to metastasize into durable institutions.

Ultimately, persistence is almost certainly key to exploiting the social media factors discussed herein, and this is an area in which ISIS excels, producing large volumes of content, at a consistent pace and over an extended period of time.

Fans of competing mainstream movements may not be able to tolerate the monomaniacal output necessary to activate temporal acceleration, social contagion and immersion, all of which inherently involve very high volumes of highly focused media consumption and social interaction. This has implications for analysis of efforts to counter violent extremism in the ISIS context, as pro-mainstream messaging and initiatives may be fundamentally incomparable to their extremist equivalents.

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## The Dreams of Islamic State

by Iain R. Edgar

### Abstract

Previous research has shown that jihadis attach great importance to dreams, to the point of taking them into account in personal and strategic decision-making. This article asks whether the same is true of Islamic State (IS). Using evidence from social media and IS publications, I review night dream accounts by IS members and supporters, seeking to assess the prominence, main themes, and reception of such accounts. Dreams appear to be at least as important to IS as to previous jihadi groups. Like other jihadis, IS activists consider dreams a potential window into the future and use them to make sense of the world, justify decisions, and claim authority. In at least one case (that of Garland, Texas attacker Elton Simpson), a dream may have informed the decision to take violent action.

**Keywords:** Jihadism, dreaming, ISIS, Al Qaeda, ideology

### Introduction

Several studies over the last decade have shown that militant Islamists such as al-Qaida and the Taliban make extensive use of reported night dreams to inspire, announce, and validate violent jihad.[1] In this article I ask whether dreams play a similar role in Islamic State (IS). Using evidence from social media and IS publications, I review night dream accounts by IS members and supporters and the discussions they generate. This is the first academic study of the significance of dreams in Islamic State ideology.

As we shall see, IS members and sympathisers appear to attach considerable importance to dreams. Just as in other jihadi groups, dream accounts and discussions proliferate, and activists express belief in the predictive potential of night dreams. Dreams may also feature in decision-making processes at different levels in the organization, from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's decision to withdraw forces from Mosul in late 2014 to IS sympathizer Elton Simpson's May 2015 attack in Garland, Texas.

The article has three parts. First I summarize what we know about the significance of dreams in Muslim societies generally and in jihadi groups specifically. I then describe a sample of IS-related night dream accounts, before briefly discussing the connection between dreams and action.

### The significance of dreams

#### *Dreaming in Islam*

To understand the jihadi appreciation for dreams, it is important to realise that dreams are important in Islam more generally. The interpretive tradition regarding the "true dream" (*al-ru'ya*) is a fundamental feature of Islamic theology.[2] There are three dream reports in the Qur'an, two reported as received by the Prophet Mohammed. One of these directly relates to the decisive battle of Badr between the Muslims and the Quraish from Mecca in 624 CE.[3] The Joseph Sura in the Qur'an contains the reported dream experiences of the Prophet Joseph, such as that of the seven fat and seven lean cows.[4] The true dream tradition is reported more extensively in the *hadith*, the recorded sayings of the Prophet Mohammed. The *hadith* Bukhari and

Muslim Sahih, for example, each have a chapter recording the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed about true dreams that come from Allah.[5]

The Islamic tradition distinguishes between three types of dreams: the true dream (*al-ru'ya*), the false dream, which may come from the devil, and the meaningless everyday dream (*hulm*). True dreams are more likely to be experienced or received by pious Muslims, but potentially all Muslims can receive them. There is an extensive literature on the art and science of dream interpretation going back over a thousand years.

In the contemporary Muslim world, dreams command considerable popular interest. Arabic TV channels, for example, are replete with dream interpretation programs. My anthropological research over many years across four continents has shown that *istikhara*, the ritual of incubating night dreams for guidance, is widespread in many if not most Islamic countries.[6] During my fieldwork research, especially in Pakistan, Turkey, Bosnia and the UK, I rarely met a Muslim who didn't relate to his night dreams as a potential portal to the divine. Moreover, I found this dream tradition to be similar across all the main branches of Islam: Sunni, Shia, Salafi and Sufi, as well as amongst the minority Alevi and Ahmadiyya sects.[7] In the Sufi mystical traditions, dreaming is most highly regarded.[8] While Sufis have traditionally paid the most attention to dreams, the more literalist Salafis appear to have become more interested in them over time. As a salafi dream interpretation book states:

*Salafis view the tradition of vision and dream been interpretation as being rooted in Islam and having been inherited from the Salaf. Indeed, it has inherited from the Prophets (peace be upon them), so any insinuation that Salafis are in some way opposed to vision interpretation in its totality would be incorrect.[9]*

Dreams thus have a different status in the Muslim world compared to Western societies. A longstanding Christian tradition dating in part to the 4th century CE viewed dreams as superstition, perhaps to prevent charismatic dreamers challenging the institution of the church.[10] Later, Freudian psychoanalysis considered dream content as mirroring, reassembling, and encoding personal experiences of the past. By contrast, Islamic dream interpretation has an important forward looking component.[11] As Lamoreux writes, "Dream interpretation offered Muslims a royal road that led not inward but outward, providing insight not into the dreamer's psyche but into the hidden affairs of the world. In short, the aim of dream interpretation was not diagnosis, but divination." [12]

### *Dreaming in jihadism*

For my previous research on al-Qaida's dreams and interpretive practices, I trawled books, newspapers accounts, internet reports, and trial transcripts for dream accounts by militants to see whether there was a distinctive jihadist dreaming. I found a lot of material. Bin Ladin himself brought up dreams in one of the first videos released after 9/11.[13] Elsewhere I found dream accounts reported by numerous well-known militants, including the failed shoe bomber Richard Reid, the two core 9/11 planners Ramzi bin al-Shibh and Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, the alleged 20th hijacker Zacariou Moussaoui, and several Guantanamo Bay detainees.[14] Scattered through autobiographies and biographies of various al-Qaida-linked militants, night dreams are prominently described and invoked as justifications for daytime decisions to wage violent jihad.[15] The famous jihadi website [www.azzam.com](http://www.azzam.com) contained lists of martyr biographies from Bosnia and elsewhere that contained many examples of dreams of martyrdom with anticipatory illustrations of either future paradisaical states of being, or of fallen martyrs describing Paradise to the living.

I also conducted extensive fieldwork in Pakistan, Turkey and Northern Cyprus. In April 2005 I interviewed Rahimullah Yusufzai, a BBC journalist then (now Editor of the *Pakistan News International*) who was probably the only journalist who had extensively interviewed Taliban leader Mullah Omar pre-9/11. Yusufzai confirmed the importance of both inspirational and strategic planning dream accounts for the Taliban commanders and soldiers:

*I kept hearing these stories, no big military operation can happen unless he (Mullah Omar) gets his instructions in his dreams; he was a big believer in dreams; he told me he had been entrusted with a mission, a holy mission and the mission is to unite Afghan, to save it from divisions and to restore order and enforce Sharia law.[16]*

And it was not just in the mountains of Afghanistan that radicals discussed dreams. Three years ago at a conference a Western intelligence official told me that “Everyone we are watching in our area is into dreaming as crucial to their jihadi membership, progress and their final decision, via Istakhara/Islamic dream incubation, as to whether to go on militant jihad.”[17]

Of course, not all Muslims who believe they have true dreams about jihad or martyrdom, become militants. For some radicalized individuals, however, a dream or series of dreams can be a catalyst for taking up arms. A short or long period of contemplation can be followed by a vivid command or message dream of the kind described by Yusufzai above.[18]

Not all dream imagery is as explicit as Mullah Omar’s message dream. Often the meaning of the dream is opaque or metaphorical and needs interpreting by the dreamer, possibly via one of a number of dream interpretation books (such as the well known one purported to be by the medieval Islamic dream interpreter Ibn Sirin), by a family member or an Imam, or indeed through a dream interpretation website.[19] In radical circles or militant groups, that interpretation is often carried out by fellow activists, and therefore susceptible to biased interpretation or outright manipulation.

### ***The dreams of IS members and supporters***

Let us now turn to the dreams of IS fighters and their many online supporters. In the following I present a sample of dream accounts collected from social media and IS publications.

#### *Twitter-based dream interpretation*

A number of IS sympathisers discuss dreams on Twitter. JM Berger’s article in this special issue refers to the now-defunct Twitter handle “End of Time Dreams” (@entimdrms), which “serves as a broker between dreamers and allegedly authoritative third parties (more numerous and tweeting in Arabic) who interpret those dreams with a pro-ISIS bent.”[20] The name of the handle is likely inspired by a *hadith* which states that at the end of time the dreams of the believer will come true.[21]

At the current time of writing, a similar-looking Twitter handle (@entdrm13) is active and providing the same kind of service as the original End Time Dreams.[22] About half the posts on @entdrm13 are about dream accounts that seem to be offering positive expectations of IS advances on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria. Some of the dreams also refer to anticipated pledges of allegiance by other jihadi groups to IS. Examples include the following:

*July 11: seems to be a few dreams about the Kurds too, watch out for Kobani and Tal Abyad.[23]*

*July 11: The brother had this dream yesterday so that leaves until next Thursday or Friday for it to occur: just had a dream that Hasakah has been liberated in Ramadan and ISIS is marching towards Kurds. Abu Talha@akbanyash87.[24]*

Here we see dreams presented as anticipatory or even in the prophetic tradition of true dreams.

*July 11: recent rumours whether al shabaad will give bayat...here's two dreams. Also a dream from 2013 about a bayat from Egypt:[25]*

*Dream: I saw al-Zawahiri in video giving a talk and you could see signs of regret on him. I give bayat to the amir of the lands between the two rivers (Iraq) and Somalia.*

*Interpretation (on site): if the dream comes true then al Zawahiri will give bayat to the Islamic state after the mujahideen of Somalia give it (al shabaab) and Allah knows best. [26]*

We see here the classic Islamic theme of dreams shedding potential light on the future. Such posts probably serve to reinforce the sense among IS fighters that God and destiny is on their side in their holy war. They view the future as being known only to God, but also as divivable through true dreams. Let us now take a look at some slightly longer dream descriptions by IS fighters.

*Explicit dreams: The "Critical Prophet"[27]*

The following example was posted by a Russian speaking IS fighter and was shared on social media on 1 July 2015 by several IS accounts including @pravdaig ("Truth ISIS"). The timing of the dream was significant, because it reportedly occurred during a series of difficult battles for IS against the Syrian Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) during June and July. In mid-June 2015, Kurdish forces recaptured the Syrian border town of Tel Abyad – which is the focus of the dream – from IS in a significant defeat for the extremist group, because it deprived IS of a key point for bringing supplies and foreign fighters into Syria.[28]

*THE DREAM OF A CERTAIN BROTHER!*

*Assalam aleikum Muslim brothers and sisters and mujahideen! Recently, one of the brothers of the Islamic State dreamed a dream. In the dream, he saw the Communist Kurds took Tel Abyad and got as far as Ayn al-Isa. And he saw the Prophet of Peace [NB in Russian, the word "mir" can mean both "peace" and "world"] above them, who thrust his sword into the ground. And the brothers said to him, fight with us against them. He replied that he would not fight. When they ask him about the reason for his refusal, he replied that you are being profligate with food [i.e. wasting food], throwing food away and not giving it to the poor, you are not getting up for the night time namaz [prayers]. May Allah reward you with a blessing!*

Here we can see that a dream image of what is presumed to be the Prophet Mohammed, (though that is not certain) is taken as a true dream according to the *hadiths* as described beforehand. The fighter's supplication for help from the Prophet is refused due to IS fighters failing to do their charitable duty of feeding the poor. This dream would likely be interpreted by fighters as a command to give more food to the poor and to be more observant of prayer in the future.

*Opaque dreams: "The Lion, the Tree and the Hypocrite"[29]*

Another Chechen IS fighter writes of a dream that a fellow IS militant named Abu Yusuf had about Umar Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili), an ethnic Chechen from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge who has risen to become

IS's military commander in Syria. Shishani is a greatly-admired figure among Russian-speaking IS jihadis. To be fighting alongside Umar is therefore a noteworthy event. The fighter who relates Abu Yusuf's dream goes on to say that, he, too, had the very same dream.

*One brother-mujahid (Abu Yusuf) had a dream: "I was standing on the front line, as if guarding the brothers. It seemed as if brother Adam was among them, and definitely Umar Shishani. Suddenly, I heard the noises of dogs, suddenly it became dark, and Umar and the other brothers were asleep. I was alert, and started to look attentively in all directions, and I saw a large animal like a lion, dull gray in color. Alongside it was a masked man, looking like the brothers, who petted the lion.*

*I went up to Umar and said,*

*"Umar, there is a lion and a suspicious man in a mask."*

*He went with me, "show me," he says, and I showed him.*

*I asked him, "Can you shoot them?" At that, Umar said, "Wait a minute and look at them."*

*But suddenly they saw us, the man in the mask saw us first. And he swiftly ran at me, saying, now I will kill you.*

*I asked Umar for permission to shoot.*

*But Umar instead of speaking fell silent. The man in the mask ran very close. I wanted to shoot but it seemed I had not taken the safety off my gun. But Umar, defending me, started to shoot at him. I also opened fire and we started to shoot together and killed the one in the mask. But the lion was not dead. Then Umar said, "there's a tree, jump up on it." All the brothers jumped. Me and Umar remained on the ground.*

*Umar said that these lions can climb trees. So be careful. We also climbed the tree. And the lion jumps after us and says to me in human speech, "if I catch you, I'll kill you." He jumps from side to side. I jump up after him. I jump, catch the lion's head and turn it this side and that. And I say to myself, 'I'm only afraid of Allah, not you.' And I actually killed the lion."*

*Ma sha'llah. And at that time I dreamed the same dream. We explained the dream according to the Quran and the Sunna: the lion is the taghut, the man in the mask is a munafiq (hypocrite), the tree is IS.[30]*

In these two contrasting Russian/Chechen IS fighters' dreams we see the classic distinction between explicit and opaque dreams. The first dream gives a clear reprimand about the waste of food and failure to pray correctly, while the second dream is more metaphorical and open to interpretation. This distinction echoes the Freudian notion of manifest and latent dream content.[31] The command dream doesn't need interpretation, but rather explicitly advocates remedial action and explains military failure. The metaphorical interpretation of the second dream utilizes Qur'anic references, which is commonplace in Islamic dream interpretation books and dictionaries.[32] The second dream also shows Umar Shishani as a heroic and successful warrior leader saving the dreamer and the group from being devoured by the enemy lion and man (hypocrite).

There is an intriguing reference at the end of this dream text about the reporter (the author) and the reported (the dreamer) having experienced the same dream. Sharing the same dream does seem to add to its perceived importance though; Philips writes that the "fifth principle regarding true dreams" is that they are shared, and refers to Bukhari who records that the 'Night of Power' *Laylatul al-Qadr* in Ramadan was confirmed by the prophet Mohammed following some people dreaming about this.[33] We also know from Bin Laden's first



video post-9/11 that he was worried prior to the attack that people would get wind of it as so many of his followers were having dreams of planes flying into tall buildings.[34]

#### *Dream accounts as authoritative arguments*

*Dabiq*, the Islamic State's main English-language newsletter, is primarily concerned with reports of battlefield successes and effective rebel governance. But *Dabiq* also contains references to dreams. In one instance, *Dabiq* reproduces a dream account from a well-known hadith:

*When the Prophet (sallallahu alay-hi was sallam) migrated to madinah, At-Tufayl ibn amr Ad-dawsi (radiyallahu anh) migrated to the Prophet, and along with At-Tufayl migrated a man of his tribe. They later disliked residence in Madinah (because of disease and fatigue caused by its climate). The man fell sick and lost patience. So he took hold of a wide arrowhead and cut off his fingerjoints. The blood gushed forth from his hands, until he died. At-Tufayl said to him, 'what did your Lord do with you? He replied, 'Allah granted me forgiveness because of my hijrah to his Prophet'. At-Tufayl said, 'why do I see you covering your hands?' He replied, 'I was told, 'we will not mend what you have damaged.' At-Tufayl narrated this dream to Allah's messenger (sallallahu alay-hi was sallam). Then Allah's messenger prayed, 'O Allah, forgive him also for his two hands' (Sahih Muslim).[35]*

This dream narrative and its interpretation are included in a section devoted to 'Hijrah and Forgiveness'. This is a so-called "strong" (i.e. reliable) hadith, and its inclusion provides theological justification for IS's claim that emigrating to Islamic State will lead inexorably to God's forgiveness of previous sins.[36] Indeed, just previous to the above quotation is the reporting of the Prophet Mohammed saying, again from Sahih Muslim *hadith*,

*Are you not aware that Islam wipes out all previous sins? And that Hijrah wipes out all previous sins? And that Hajj wipes out all previous sins?*

#### *Paradise revealed through Dreams*

IS's ideological literature is replete with the expressed belief that fighters who join IS and die on the battlefield become martyrs for whom a special place has been reserved in paradise. One example from *Dabiq* refers to a paradisaical outcome for having gone on *Hijrah*:

*Because Hijrah for Allah's cause is a great matter, Allah revealed about it...Allah is pleased with them and they are pleased with him, and he has prepared for them gardens beneath rivers flow, wherein they will abide for ever [sic]. That is the great success.[37]*

Al-Baghdadi, IS leader, in a recent audio tape constantly refers to the future paradisaical state of those who die in the cause of jihad:

*And He (the Glorified) said, And those who are killed in the cause of Allah – never will He waste their deeds. He will guide them and amend their condition, and admit them to Paradise, which He has made known to them. Indeed, Allah has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties [in exchange] for that they will have Paradise. They fight in the cause of Allah, so they kill and are killed. [It is] a true promise [binding] upon Him in the Torah and the Gospel and the Qur'an. And who is truer to his covenant than Allah? So rejoice in your transaction which you have contracted. And it is that which is the great attainment.[38]*

*Believing in the 'invisible' Paradise*

Given this belief, it is not surprising that the night dreams of IS fighters and other jihadis are often dreaming about Paradise. In the Islamic dream tradition, the only way to personally pre-experience heaven and hell is through the true dream or vision. In chapter nine of the *hadith* by Bukhari there are several accounts of the prophet Mohammed's paradisaical dreams offering information as to followers and their place there.

Kinberg's detailed study shows how dreams in Islam have historically been considered as a "communicative technology" between the living and the dead.[39] She defines two types of dreams: dreams that emphasise rewards bestowed upon the pious in the afterworld, and dreams in which the dead answer the questions of the living about the process of dying, or about the most rewarding deed. The dreams included in these categories share one common ethical purpose, namely to show believers the right way of conduct. In the first type, dreams illustrate specific rewards such as "its magnificent gardens and palaces, and its beautiful women who wait for the pious people to come." [40] Kinberg quotes many examples, one of which is that of a reported dream of the Prophet Mohammed.

*Likewise the Prophet informed his companions about ar-Rumaysaa and Bilaal being in paradise based upon one of the Prophet's dreams. Jaabir ibn Abdillah related that the Prophet said: I saw myself (in a dream) entering paradise, and saw Aboo Talhah's wife, ar-Rumaysaa. Then I heard footsteps and asked, "Who is it?" Somebody said, "It is Bilaal." Then I saw a palace with a lady sitting in its courtyard and I asked, "to whom does this palace belong?" Somebody replied, "It belongs to Umar." I wanted to enter it and look around, but I remembered your (Umar's) sense of honor (and did not). Umar said, "Let my parents be sacrificed for you, O Allah's messenger. How dare I think of my sense of honour being offended by you?" [41]*

So, paradisaical insight and knowledge of other worlds can be available via the portal of dreams. The example of Mohammed above is echoed in many biographies of fallen jihadis before the formation of IS and detailed and analysed elsewhere.[42] One well-known example can be found in the famous "9/11 hijacker letter" which instructed the hijackers on what to do in the final days and hours before the operation: "You should know that the Gardens {of paradise} have been decorated for you in the most beautiful way, and that the *houris* are calling to you: 'O friend of God, come,' after dressing in their most beautiful clothing." [43]

Such beliefs are very widespread among militant Islamists. For example, a *Sunday Times* journalist abducted by jihadi insurgents in Syria in 2012 later said his guard had lectured him about the rewards of martyrdom:

*And we kept receiving sermons from the Koran, When you die you will be taken to paradise by a green bird. You will see Allah and his thrones, in a house made of gold and silver. Your family will meet you up there. You will have 72 wives. [44]*

The motif of "green birds" is commonly invoked in relation to martyrdom. For example, on 21 July 2015, the *Guardian* newspaper reported the death in action of Reyaad Khan, a 21-year old British foreign fighter from Cardiff, as follows:

*On social media, an account believed to belong to a female British jihadi in Syria said on 17 July that "Abu Dujana" (a name used for Khan) had been "lost". Employing a term used by jihadis to describe dead fighters, she went on to describe him as having become a "green bird." [45]*

David Cook traces the dream-martyrdom connection back to the seventh century AD, when Muslims were also reporting dreams about martyrs, as recorded by Ibn Abi al-Dunya (d. 994-95). [46] Cook, who maintains a database of some 5,000 dream accounts from throughout Islamic history, concludes his survey of early Islamic martyrdom:

*All of these dreams – only a small selection of those available – are common throughout the Muslim martyrdom tradition. The general themes of the martyrdom literature serve to confirm the status of the martyrs after their death, to demonstrate their satisfaction with their fate and to influence others to follow them.[47]*

Cook's conclusions about early Islamic martyrdom and dreaming closely resemble mine in relation to contemporary jihadis.

Dreams and visions are likely then to have kept their special place in the spiritual or ideological worldview of IS. A core part of such a role for the dream vision is to give information about future paradise and the place of fallen comrades; indeed such dreams are the key to the unseen, and presumed heavenly knowledge.

The evidence reviewed so far suggests that dreams interest IS members greatly and constitute an important part of their religious experience. But does it matter? Do these spiritual experiences have any practical implications?

### ***Dreams and IS decision-making***

Previous research has shown that some jihadis take, or at least claim to take, dreams into consideration when they make decisions to join a group, become a foreign fighter, volunteer for operations, or (if they are leaders) pursue particular military strategies. There are several examples of jihadis claiming to make such decisions almost *entirely* based on alleged dreams.[48] Thus far there is limited evidence of this in relation to IS, but there are two important cases worth mentioning.

#### *Al-Baghdadi's Mosul dream*

The first is a very interesting, albeit somewhat unreliable, report of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi allegedly taking a strategic military decision based on a dream. In March 2015, anti-IS news outlets reported that al-Baghdadi had had a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad ordered him to withdraw forces from Mosul. [49] The Kurdish Democratic Party website reported that "Baghdadi ordered his fighters to withdraw from the city, following his dream that he met the Prophet Mohammed, who ordered him to leave Mosul city." This was at a time when the Iraqi army had retaken Tikrit and there was speculation that it would move toward Mosul. The Kurdish website interpreted the report to mean that "fear is spreading among the militants in Mosul for the predictions of liberating Mosul."

While this one report is by no means conclusive regarding the current importance of night dreams within IS, the account is entirely within the realm of the possible, because in the past other militant leaders such as Mullah Omar have openly claimed to have made military decisions based on dreams. In such cases we can never know whether the leader's dream experience is genuine or fabricated, but it is worth bearing in mind that in Islam it is considered a serious sin to lie about a dream; indeed a special part of hell is reserved for such sinners.[50] Even if this report were fabricated by the anti-IS Kurds it still shows how at this time dream reports can be part of the current Middle Eastern propaganda war.

#### *The Dream of Elton Simpson*

The second data point concerns Elton Simpson, one of the two perpetrators of the gun attack on the Muhammad cartoon exhibition in Garland, Texas, in May 2015. According to Amarnath Amarasingam, who

studied Simpson's conversion statement and interviewed his family, Simpson may have been spurred to act based on a dream. Here is Amarasingam's analysis:

*According to some in his baqiya[51] family, with migration to Syria no longer viable, a few factors came together pushing Simpson to act. First, there is the increasingly vibrant narrative coming from the Islamic State that Muslim youth who cannot migrate to Syria must commit acts of violence in their home countries. Second, Simpson became aware of an event in Texas, organized by so-called anti-Islam activist Pamela Geller to draw the Prophet Muhammad. Given the brand of Islam Simpson had adopted by this point, he clearly saw the event as a legitimate and timely target.*

*Then there is the dream. As some members of his online family told me, Simpson had a dream some months ago "about a woman in a hijab looking down at him on the road." For those who see themselves on the path of jihad, this dream is often seen as an indication that the women (or "virgins") of paradise are awaiting him. In other words, it is a sign that martyrdom is near. Simpson followed the signs that he believed were being sent to him and acted accordingly. For his baqiya family, however, it came as a shock. He left no clues and didn't really discuss it with them, leaving behind only a tweet pledging an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State. "The brother was beautiful," said one of his online friends, "We always exchanged hadith and always laughed and joked. I will miss him. I wish I told him how much I loved him for the sake of Allah.[52]*

We also know that Simpson discussed his dream with IS-affiliated Twitter users. Berger writes that Elton Simpson had been in contact with the abovementioned "End of Time Dreams" Twitter handle days before his attack:

*Significantly, "End of Time Dreams" conversed over Twitter with Elton Simpson, one of two Americans who attacked a "Draw the Prophet Mohammed" contest in Garland, Texas. While a complete record of the exchange was unavailable, due to Simpson's account having been suspended, it appeared "End of Time Dreams" arranged for a dream to be interpreted at Simpson's request several days before the attack took place.[53]*

Simpson, it would seem, was emotionally affected by this paradise virgin dream and his actions may have been triggered by it. We cannot be sure how important the dream was compared to other factors, but we cannot exclude the possibility that the dream mattered.

These two examples alone do not tell us much about the extent to which dreams inform IS decision-making. More research is needed here. It is worth bearing in mind that we are at a very early stage in the process of documenting the IS phenomenon. We may know a lot about the group's propaganda, military exploits, and governance efforts, but we have only rudimentary knowledge of the personal trajectories of IS fighters, especially leaders. As more thick descriptions of life within IS emerges, I expect to see more evidence of dream-inspired action.

### **Conclusion**

Dreams seen as true by the believer can transform perceptions of earthly defeat into the will of God and the call to greater righteousness. Dreams can augur victory, legitimize defeat, and inspire or demoralize armies. Dreams and their interpretations are strategic military goods, and may be manipulated strategically; dreams confirm and legitimate radical group membership, the path of holy jihad and the destined entry to paradise, with all sins forgiven. Dreams are a form of metaphysical currency to be shared and reflected upon and redeemed in action.

IS follows in this tradition and resembles al-Qaida and Taliban in their ascribing importance to the Islamic dreamland. The examples presented here reflect the traditional Islamic separation of dreams into clear message dreams and metaphorical ones, and the tendency to see some dreams as offering information about future paradisaical realms. Dreams may even be critical tipping points to the move from contemplating jihad to killing people as in the case of Elton Simpson.

However, this article only constitutes a preliminary study, and more research is needed on dreaming in IS. A key question regards the importance of the night dream in the recruitment, inspiration, and day-to-day guidance of IS members of different ranks in the organisation. Are “lone wolf” fighters in developed countries more prone to relate to their dreams than fighters on the Middle Eastern battlefields? And how do such “lone wolf” fighters interpret special dreams without the support of actual real life comrades? Are particular dream imagery sequences linked to being primary, secondary or ancillary drivers to radical conversion to militant jihad? Do IS fighters dream of their leader, al-Baghdadi, or other commanders such as Umar Shishani, and if so how, and with what outcome? How do IS followers deal with dreams thought to be prophetic but that don't seem to come true in reality. These questions can be addressed by compiling and examining more written dream accounts, by analysing memoirs of IS fighters, and by interviewing IS defectors and former foreign fighters.

The recent Quilliam foundation analysis of the propaganda war between IS and the West describes the radicalisation process as being from “tacit supporter to active member.”[54] Their analysis weighs the evidence as to the radicalising effect of the internet and social media, and refers to Ellul's work on propaganda immersion; yet how that total propaganda immersion influences dreaming and how that subsequent dreaming influences behaviour (or not) is not considered.[55] As David Anderson (Q.C.), the official reviewer of Britain's terrorism laws, put it: “A lot of people talk a good game about terrorism. The knack is to identify those who are going to do something about it.”[56]

Maybe intelligence agencies will one day use dream reports as part of a predictive technology to identify individuals and groups who reach and cross over the line between contemplation and action. Hopefully we won't reach a scenario in which thousands of tiny ‘butterfly’ drones listen to dream narratives at breakfast time across parts of Asia, only to zap certain eye-rubbing young men after running their dream account through an algorithm.

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## Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output

by Aaron Y. Zelin

### *Abstract*

*This article seeks to examine, quantitatively and qualitatively, one week of official media releases of the Islamic State (IS). Due to the breadth of IS official media releases, this provides a snapshot upon which to better understand the different styles and messaging streams IS releases on a weekly basis. The article shows that IS produces much more material, and on a broader range of topics, than what gets reported in the mainstream media. Execution videos make up just a fraction of the overall output and are dwarfed by the number of IS productions on military affairs, governance, preaching, moral policing, and other themes. The analysis also shows that IS relies very heavily on visual as opposed to text-based propaganda, and that most of its military activities take place in Iraq, not Syria.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, ISIS, propaganda, ideology, social media, Internet, rebel governance

### *Introduction*

Ever since the Islamic State (IS) took over a third of Iraq and declared a caliphate in the summer of 2014, the world has been fascinated with the IS media operation. Many have looked to the group's propaganda for answers to the question why it has not only gained substantial local support, but also attracted scores of foreign fighters. Yet the literature still lacks an exhaustive study of the full media output of the self-styled state. This is not only due to the language barrier (the vast majority of official media releases are in Arabic), but also to a singular fascination by the media and some researchers with IS' most grotesque acts or messaging targeted toward a Western audience. As a result, the breadth of IS's messaging strategy is insufficiently understood.

This article aims to start filling this lacuna by examining the totality of IS media productions during a sample week; from April 18 to April 24, 2015. Considering IS's full propaganda output – as opposed to a selection of the most spectacular productions – reveals a very different picture from that conveyed in mainstream Western media. We will see that IS attempts to use media as a force multiplier to make it appear it is active in many locations even though the vast majority of its activities are in Iraq and Syria. Even among those two, there is a difference, with far more military operations taking place in Iraq than in Syria. IS's media apparatus is decentralized through its provincial-level media offices, and 88% of its releases are visual. All of IS's media is released in Arabic, and only a small proportion is translated into other languages. In the media releases themselves, IS portrays itself as winners, competent, and pious, while it portrays its enemies as unjust and unbelievers.

Because of the vast and sometimes overwhelming quantity of official IS media products, the scope of this paper is limited to giving a snapshot of IS media production. It would be yeoman's work, if not the subject of a full length book, to comb and analyze IS' full archive. This, no doubt, would be an important task, insofar as understanding the evolution, ebb and flow, and changing dynamics of IS media over a longer period of time. For the sake of brevity, this analysis will only cover one week of official releases. This, of course, is only a small sample, and it might be coloured by the particular events that took place that week. That said, it is still a large sample, and one that can shed light on the breadth in content and number of releases from IS.[1] This,

in turn may help explain why certain individuals at a local and global level have an interest in IS, decide to join it, or on an unofficial level outside the territories of IS, spread its message on social media.

While most of IS's media operation takes place on the Internet, it should be noted that IS also organizes viewing parties of its official content locally in the territories it controls. It also has created so-called *nuqat i'lamyya* (media points) in a number of cities and villages. These consist of a stationary stall, a small shack, or a roving car or winnebago that distributes printed, CDs/DVDs, and/or USB drives of IS official media to locals, with a target audience mainly comprised of children and young teenagers.

Unlike a few years ago, when password-protected forums were the headquarters of media releases and conversation amongst jihadis online, now Twitter has become the central distribution platform. Since the series of video releases of IS murdering American, British, Japanese, and Jordanian journalists, humanitarian workers, and a pilot, Twitter began taking down IS' official media account, but in response al-I'tisam, IS's main distribution unit, went through tens of variations on its name when creating new Twitter handles whenever it would come back online. In response to this and the increasingly quick rate at which Twitter was able to shut down the al-I'tisam account, reminiscent of Twitter's campaign against al-Qaida's East African branch Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin, IS created a new methodology for distribution. In this way, IS devised a "centralized decentralization" plan, creating a number of official dissemination accounts, meaning that if one account was taken down, others will still be operational. These other accounts would then tweet whenever the new account of the one taken down was back online using an alternative handle. This provided an authentication mechanism that has largely worked since late fall 2014. It is also a way for one that follows this activity on a daily basis to assess truly what is a legitimate official dissemination account from one that is a fake, some online grassroots jihadi activist, or a foot soldier that is not connected with IS' official media apparatus.

To collect all of IS' official media releases during one week in April, I followed three of its official media disseminators. They included in order of usage, Ayun al-Ummah (with two accounts, @news\_ommah\_ and @eyes\_\_\_IS), Abu Muhammad al-Fatih (with one account @gothoathinnhg), and Abu Mu'awiyah al-Shami (with three accounts, @abo\_moawea\_H1\_d, @abo\_moawea\_HD, and @abo\_moawea\_HD19). As a consequence of the constant taking down of IS twitter accounts, none of these accounts are active today. That said, I maintain an archive saved on my laptop of all releases during the one week time period. Additionally, due to the taking down of accounts, it is conceivable that I may have missed a release or two, though I am confident based on my years of experience collecting and verifying that I retrieved the vast majority of official releases.

The article has two parts. The first offers some descriptive statistics about the corpus, while the second looks in depth at the main types of content.

### ***IS Propaganda by the Numbers***

Besides the sourcing and release title/description, I coded the releases for eight variables: date, wilayat (province), country, city/village/region, media center, language(s), medium, and types. During the week of April 18-24, 2015, IS put out 123 different media releases. On average, IS posted 18 media releases per day, though the numbers varied from 9 documents on April 20 to 24 documents on April 18 (see Table 1).



Date	Number of Releases
4/18/2015	24
4/19/2015	17
4/20/2015	9
4/21/2015	21
4/22/2015	21
4/23/2015	16
4/24/2015	15
<i>Average</i>	<i>18</i>

Table 1. IS Media Releases by Date

Over this time span, IS media released content from 24 different provinces within its broader self-styled Caliphate system (see Table 2). Overall, at the time of the data collection, IS claimed to have 33 provinces, which include: Iraq (10), Syria (7), Iraq/Syria (2), Yemen (5), Libya (3), Saudi Arabia (2), Algeria (1), Egypt (1), Afghanistan/Pakistan (1), and Nigeria (1). Therefore, within this one week time period, IS distributed content from 73% of the areas it claims to control and/or has a presence. Although the heartland of IS is in Raqqa and Ninawa, Halab (Aleppo) has the most releases, in part because the majority of releases are on military activities (more on this below). And while Ninawa still has active fighting, Raqqa has more or less been secured by IS, with no military battle taking place in that part of its territory. There were also three releases that did not necessarily relate specifically to any particular wilayah, but were more general. One was IS’s monthly calendar, another was a video message released by al-Hayat Media that did not mention the location of filming (even though it was most likely in Raqqa), and, finally, a graphic that suggested a “top-10” list of videos released by IS that individuals should watch.

Wilayah	Number of Releases	Wilayah	Number of Releases
Halab	18	Kirkuk	3
Ninawa	15	Tarabulus	3
al-Barakah	12	Unknown	3
al-Barqah	11	Baghdad	2
al-Anbar	7	al-Furat	2
al-Janub	7	al-Jazirah	2
al-Raqqah	6	al-Khayr	2
Dimashq	6	Gharb Ifriqiyya	2
Salah al-Din	6	Sinai	2
Homs	4	Diyala	1
Dijlah	3	Khurasan	1
Hamah	3	Sana’a	1
		Shimal Baghdad	1

Table 2. IS Media Releases by Wilayah

Although 58% (19 of 33) of IS’s claimed provinces are in Iraq and Syria, there is a disproportionate amount of content coming from those two countries with 81% (or 100 of 123) of the total. This illustrates that although IS wants to present an image that it is active and conducting different types of operations in a wide variety of locations, in fact the vast majority come from the core territories of what used to be part of Iraq and Syria. There is a significant reduction in the number of releases when one gets to the third country on the list, Libya (see Table 3).

Country	Number of Releases
Syria	52
Iraq	48
Libya	14
Unknown	3
Egypt	2
Nigeria	2
Pakistan	1
Yemen	1

Table 3. IS Media Releases by Country

Although one can identify which provinces releases are coming from, not all of them are from IS’s provincial-level media outlets. Within IS’s broader official media apparatus are a number of media wings. They include its original one—al-Furqan Media—as well as the more recently created ones in the past two years: al-I’tisam Media, Ajnad Media, and al-Hayat Media. In addition, there is also IS’s provincial-level media offices for each province as well as its news agency A’maq and its radio station al-Bayan. In the case of this particular week of tracking information, IS’s shari’a committee also released a document. As one can see in Table 4 when adding the layer of media outlets, the distribution changes compared with just the provincial-level tally. In this case, A’maq News Agency, al-Bayan Radio, al-Hayat Media, al-Furqan Media, and the Shari’a Committee represent 22% (or 27 of 123) of the media releases, while the rest of the 78% of official releases come from its provincial-level media operations. This suggests a more decentralized system compared to that of two years ago, when IS was only using al-Furqan Media. It also illustrates the organization’s growth both geographically and in terms of technical capability. This partly explains why IS is so prolific in its content production and dissemination.

Media Outlet	Number of Releases	Media Outlet	Number of Releases
Wikalat A’maq al-Ikhbariyya	15	Wilayat al-Furat	2
Wilayat Halab	15	Wilayat al-Jazira	2
Wilayat al-Baraka	11	Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya	2
Wilayat al-Barqa	10	Wilayat Hamah	2
Idha’ah al-Bayan	8	Wilayat Homs	2
Wilayat Ninawa	8	Wilayat Sinai	2
Wilayat al-Janub	7	al-Furqan Media	1
Wilayat al-Anbar	6	Wilayat al-Khayr	1
Wilayat al-Raqqa	6	Shari’a Committee	1
Wilayat Dijla	3	Wilayat al-Khayr	1
Wilayat Dimashq	3	Wilayat Diyala	1
Wilayat Kirkuk	3	Wilayat Khurasan	1
Wilayat Tarabulus	3	Wilayat Salah al-Din	1
al-Hayat Media	2	Wilayat Sana’a	1
Wilayat Baghdad	2	Wilayt Salah al-Din	1

Table 4. IS Media Releases By Media Outlet

When it comes to data at the regional and city level, there are major gaps in part because 33% (41 of 123) of the releases do not include geographical information at this resolution level. Only 12% (or 6 of 49) of the cities/villages/regions mentioned had more than two releases about them. They included Baiji (6), Benghazi (6), Ninawa, (5), Kobane (4), Darnah (3), and Mosul (3). With major fighting at the Baiji oil refinery between IS and Iraqi Shia militias, as well as at Kobane between IS and the Syrian Kurds, these locations are, not surprisingly, two of the top places mentioned. What’s more, the Libyan cities of Benghazi and Darnah are overrepresented; perhaps because IS only controls a few locations it is more willing to identify where it is operating in Libya to show it has a greater presence, as in the case of Iraq and Syria. The last is Ninawa (with

no particular city or village mentioned) and Mosul, which is the capital of Ninawa province, highlighting IS’s Iraqi stronghold.

The reason for the disproportionate Western media coverage of IS magazines such as *Dabiq* is their availability in English. This creates a biased understanding of IS as a phenomenon since *Dabiq* is for a particular audience. Yet, all of IS media content is published in Arabic, while the second largest language used is English at 6.5% (or 8 of 123).

Language	Number of Releases
Arabic	123
English	8
Russian	5
Kurdish	4
French	2
Urdu	1

Table 5. IS Media Release By Language

In addition to having its provincial-level media offices, IS has been able to put out more content by showing picture albums of its activities. It is easier to take a picture and add a graphic from the particular province it was taken in and then posting it online than the production of a video, which is a more difficult and time-consuming process. As a result, 63% (or 77 of 123) of the releases are of these online picture galleries, with a large reduction to video messages that account for 20% of IS releases for the week studied. If one adds the graphic medium, then 88% of IS releases are visual.

Medium	Number of Releases
Picture	77
Video	24
Graphic	6
News Report	6
Radio and PDF	6
Radio	2
Statement	2

Table 6. IS Media Releases by Medium

Last, there were a number of topics portrayed within all of the releases IS distributed the week under examination. A little less than half of them were military operations, projecting the image of an organization not only on the offense, but also attempting to hold its front lines, if not push them forward. In more secure areas, IS has greater freedom to conduct its da’wa campaign of calling people to join its cause, instituting its conservative social agenda through its hisba office, and providing services through its governance apparatus. A fuller discussion on the content of these releases will be addressed in the qualitative section below.

Type	Number of Releases
Military	58
Governance	13
Da'wa	10
Hisba	10
Promotion of the Caliphate	9
Enemy Attack	9
News	7
Martyrdom	4
Execution	1
Denying Enemy Reports	1
Other	1

Table 7. IS Media Releases by Type

In addition to these statistics, we have IS's daily news reports from its al-Bayan Radio Station, which describe all of its military operations for each day. If accurate, during the week that I analyzed this data, IS conducted 258 military operations in 23 of its provinces, highlighting how its media releases don't often match what it is actually undertaking on a day-to-day basis. Unlike the relative evenness in distribution between media releases from Iraq and Syria, in terms of actual military operations, Iraq accounted for 67% (or 173 of 258) of all attacks in the week covered, while IS only carried out 19% (or 48 of 258) of its military operations in Syria. This shows the potential asymmetric nature of IS media operations and how it could attempt to alter the perceptions of what it is doing, since it is clearly fighting far less in Syria than in Iraq.

### *The Framing of IS's Message*

As noted above, there are eleven key types of messages disseminated in the Islamic State's releases from the week I followed. To gain a deeper understanding of IS analytically, the most important among these types are the top six: military, governance, da'wa, hisba, promotion of the caliphate, and enemy attack. IS's news reports, its martyrdom notices, its execution of innocent Ethiopian Christians, its denial of enemy reports, and its top ten video suggestions are all interesting, but less prominent. Therefore, the analysis below will focus on the top six types of messages. As we will see, within these types there are a number of recurrent themes: IS portrays itself as winners, competent, and pious, while it casts its enemies as unjust and unbelievers.

#### *Military*

When promoting its military related-activities, IS projects an image of always being on the march. There is always progress, with enemies being killed, defeated, or territory being taken over. This echoes the winning narrative that Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger describe in their recent book *ISIS: The State of Terror*. The language described about its operations is always offensive in nature or using action verbs. IS also uses a variety of terms to discredit and dehumanize its enemies. Lastly, besides its military operations, IS also highlights military training camps as incubators of future soldiers of the so-called Caliphate, which will serve as the building blocks of a new generation of fighters.

As an example of the framing of IS's success on the battlefield, a video released by A'maq on April 18 portrays fighting in Iraq as "continued progress of the Islamic State fighters in parts of the Baiji Oil Refinery." [2] Further, in a picture series on April 20, IS shows its destruction of the Iraqi Army's armor in al-Ramadi. [3] Moreover, when describing a military operation against Kurdish forces, IS is quick to note that it inflicted "direct" casualties on the enemy. [4] At the same time, in a blog post by A'maq, it plays up the losses of its

enemies, showcasing in a video how the so-called “Free Army” (better known as the Free Syrian Army or FSA) lost its only supply line to the Damascus region at the hands of IS, while also losing 40 soldiers.[5] Further, IS highlights its counterintelligence capabilities when it destroyed minesweepers of the Iraqi Army on the al-Hadithah-al-Baghdadi Road.[6]

When discussing its military operations and capabilities, IS is keen to use derogatory language against its enemies, in part to delegitimize them, but also to present IS as the true believers and defenders of Sunni being, rights, and property. It is also a way to signal its supporters that it is defeating its enemies. During the week of releases I followed I was able to identify seven particular derogatory terms: *al-sahawat al-murtaddin* (the apostate awakening), in reference to its Sunni enemies in Iraq and Syria; ‘B.K.K.’ *al-murtaddin* (P.K.K. apostates), Kurdish fighters in Iraq and Syria; *tanzim al-nusayri* (the Alawite regime), the Assad regime and its supporters; *junud al-taghut* (soldiers of the tyrant), in reference to those fighting under General Khalifa Hiftar in Libya; *jaysh al-safawi* (the Safavid Army), a euphemism for the Iraqi army that is controlled by Iran since the Safavid’s are an old Iranian Shia dynasty; *al-ahzab al-kurdiyya al-ilhadiyya* (the atheistic Kurdish parties), another reference to the PKK as well as the YPJ in Iraq and Syria respectively; and *al-hashd al-rafidi* (the rejectionist committees), a derogatory way of describing Shia and referencing the militias established by Shia Iraqis. Because these fighting forces are outside the pale of Islam and are legitimate targets, it explains IS’s justification for extreme violence. And, as one can see, unless one is truly supportive of IS then one is likely to be subject to its excessive fighting, even other Sunnis.

The final aspect of IS military messaging deals with the future generation and the new forces it is building to continue the fight and follow through on its promise to remain and expand (*baqiya wa tatamaddad*). For example, in a picture series from the city of Hit, Iraq, IS shows off newly minted graduates from its “Two Shaykhs Military Camp”, parading them in a convoy of tens of cars and pickup trucks with dozens of individuals armed with a variety of weapons through the main street.[7] This not only highlights the importance of these new graduates, but also contributes to the militarization of civilian life by lionizing them. Similarly, following the graduation of one of its ‘cub’ units (for children and young teenagers), IS boasts of the new skills these children obtained, such as marching with the black flag and taking ready positions to fire upon the enemy at a roundabout in a town in al-Jazira province.[8] With a different focus, in a video that highlights its al-Kurar Military Camp in Dijla province, IS proudly shows the various training methods for the new recruits to demonstrate its professionalization and the serious nature of such camps. In this case, the different styles include amphibious warfare, close combat fighting, weight lifting, and urban warfare.[9]

### *Governance and Hisba*

The main message that the Islamic State puts forward when discussing its governance and hisba activities is that it is a state of high competence and swift justice, and that life goes on even while the war is continuing. There are a number of ways IS shows this. One example is through its community relations office, where it has what it describes as “hospitality meetings” with different clans, as when it met with the Albu Hasuni and al-Mushahada clans in al-Baraka province during the week under study.[10] This is a way for IS to maintain ties with local brokers and demonstrate that it is taking the interests of different actors into consideration, as well as highlight that these clans have bought into IS’s system. In addition, IS touts its state-building apparatus by doing rehabilitation work on al-Tabqa Public Hospital, opening the Education Center doors to employment, publishing of its custom shari’ah committee-approved calendar for the Islamic month of Rajab in the year 1436 Hijri, and building arches on an external road, among other things.[11]



Besides displaying state-building through public works projects, which have gotten even more sophisticated since I collected this particular week's worth of data, IS also wants to show normalcy within the territory it controls. This is why, on April 21, IS published pictures of agricultural activity continuing in Wilayat Halab in spite of the continued war and the continued business at the *suc* (market) for al-Barouza village. [12] This message was further driven home in a video message called "Services of the Subjects #1," where IS interviewed three residents in Mosul as testimonials. In it, the first man thanked God and the Islamic State for the progress and success in improving the conditions of the municipality, specifically for clearing streets and the generally comfortable living conditions. He tells people to come visit and enjoy the comfortable lifestyle in Mosul. The second man tells people to come and enjoy the stability and security in the Islamic State, while the third man explains how IS cleared large concrete slabs that had been blocking the street since 2003, reiterating the message that everyone is comfortable. [13] This is clearly propaganda, but it is the image IS hopes to portray to its supporters and potential recruits, whether locally or globally.

Last, IS highlights its *hisba* (moral policing) activity to illustrate not only that it is living up to its precepts, but also bringing to justice those who, in its view, violate such precepts. Two major ceremonial and ritualistic activities IS pursues is the burning of cigarettes, marijuana, hookahs, alcohol, and other products deemed immoral. This is of course in addition to the meting out of corporal and capital punishments. [14] Regarding the latter, during the week of media collation, IS implemented the *ta'zir* (corporal) penalty for a man embezzling Zakat funds, the *hadd* (limit/crimes against God) for a thief, *ta'zir* of four people charged with theft, and the stoning of an individual described as a "sodomite". [15] Besides these activities, which occurred during the time of this study, the IS *hisba* team is also usually involved in the destruction of Sufi and Shia shrines, closing shops during times of prayer, and making sure food and medical products being sold in markets are not expired or counterfeit, among other things.

### *Da'wa*

There are a number of critical features of IS's *da'wa* campaign. In particular, as noted above, it has been establishing permanent and/or roving 'media points' in various locations that distribute IS media content that is originally released online; passing out its own custom *da'wa* literature, which is produced by its al-Hammah Office as well as provincial-level statements; erecting billboards throughout cities and villages; and conducting *da'wa* forums, among other things. All of these activities are aimed at calling people to IS's message and interpretation of Islam. It also seeks to educate individuals to return to the "true" Islam, which they either have abandoned or have a mistaken understanding of (from IS's perspective).

For example, on April 18, IS built a new stationary media point that was soon-to-be operational in Homs province. [16] As for its *da'wa* literature, in Halab province IS distributed a number of pamphlets to residents as well as taping them to walls of shops and the outside of a mosque. The titles of this literature include "Loyalty to Islam and Not to the Nation (*al-watan*)", "Remembrance for the End of the Daytime", "The Islamic Gold Dinar or the American Paper Dollar?", "The Pinnacle of Islam", "Important Questions on Methodology (*'aqida*)", "Why Prayer in the Mosque?", and "The Two Bases Upon Jihad." [17] Likewise, in al-Janub province, IS gave individuals a brochure on the duties of the Friday prayer (*jum'a*). [18] Moreover, in al-Barqa province, IS handed out summaries of its military operations for the day in its various provinces across its self-styled state. [19]

Similarly, IS also called attention to three billboards that it had put up around the city of al-Bab in northern Syria. The first propagated one of IS's major slogans: "The Caliphate Upon the Prophetic Methodology (*manhaj*)". The second is a message to "a brother mujahid" on the importance of patience (*sabr*), while the

third one is a series of emphatic statements about the realities on the ground in the Caliphate: “Here is the Abode of Islam. Here is the Land of the Caliphate. Here [the ideas of] *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* (loyalty to the Muslims and disavowal to the unbelievers) [stand]. Here is the market of Jihad. Here is the winds of paradise. Here is the glory. Here is the dignity.”[20] All of these messages reinforce the ideas IS hopes to ingrain within society and for it to become second nature. Another avenue for putting out its message and ideas is through da’wa meetings. One such event took place on April 20, and was targeted toward children and younger teenagers. Many of these forums have targeted this particular age group because IS understands that they are the basis of the future. In this case, three children made the pitch to other young potential adherents. The first child recites Qur’anic verses and Islamic poetry, verses about serving God and God’s loving nature, and on doing jihad. He also tells the crowd to undertake jihad and sings IS’s *nashid* (religiously-sanctioned *a capella* hymns) about the caliphate remaining (*baqiya*). An even younger child then thanks God for giving him strength and courage and makes many religious references, while the oldest child of three discusses how “we have become and we will stay soldiers” and concludes by talking about the importance of serving God.[21]

### *Promotion of the Caliphate*

When looking at the full official output of IS one could argue that it is all about the promotion of its Caliphate. This is true of course, but I also want to identify particular messages where IS emphasizes the greatness of its overall vision and mission. Increasingly, it has relied on taking pictures of nature within its territorial control to show how idyllic, pristine, and beautiful the Caliphate is, even though the environment within the Islamic State is no different now than when it was either under the control of the Maliki regime in Iraq or under Syrian rebel forces or the Assad regime in Syria. Nevertheless, this kind of message appears to really resonate with supporters. In addition, IS’s messaging has also sought to highlight the significance of its social services, as well as the great life one can live under the Caliphate, especially by foreign fighters. There is also the component of new local pledges of allegiance (*bay’at*) to IS to illustrate that there is a momentum toward supporting it and therefore, why should one wait if one has yet to do so, as was the case of this particular week of analysis, when IS released a new bay’a pledge from Wilayat Sana’a in Yemen.[22]

A perfect example of IS highlighting the beauty of the environment within the Islamic State is its media release on April 18, which includes pictures of the ripples of a river, a dandelion, and a green forest in Wilayat al-Barakah.[23] Three days later, in Wilayat Halab it showed another, smaller stream and a shepherd moving his flock of sheep.[24] Lastly, in the town of al-Hul, IS released a picture of the sunset that is bright orange and red, with rays coming through the pillow-like clouds.[25] In many ways, this is the “Instagramification” of IS media, which appeals to its younger audience in the West who might decide to emigrate (*hijra*) to Iraq or Syria.

Another way IS seeks to promote itself is through two different videos looking at the medical services IS provides within the provinces of Aleppo and Raqqa, both released on April 24. The latter video went viral because the Australian Tareq Kamleh, who went by Abu Yusuf al-Ustrali, spoke in English in the video about the pediatric department. The story was then picked up by virtually every major media outlet in the West. This is an example of the megaphone effect IS hopes to gain through its official media releases, since the mainstream media helps spread its propaganda much more widely than it can do alone.

In the first video, four doctors speak about the necessity of providing healthcare to the poor and heal the sick. They also discuss the reputed progress and growth with its facilities and highlight that one no longer need *wasta* (connections) to get into the hospital, contrasting how IS administers such services compared with the Assad regime.[26] In the second video, IS gets into more detail about the different departments within

the medical facility it operates by speaking with six doctors. For example, it has an administrative health office that is the centerpiece of the entire structure. The hospital also has an injury wing, an x-ray division, a physical therapy center, an acupuncture department, a kidney department, the aforementioned pediatric department, and a medical school. The video even provides metrics such as having 500 patients per week. It also notes that doctors from all over the world are helping, including from Russia, Australia, Tunisia, and Sri Lanka, as well as women doctors working with female patients.[27]

### *Enemy Attack*

Finally, there are two major ways IS portrays attacks from the enemy: first, attacks upon 'ordinary' Muslims; and second, upon infrastructure within the Islamic State. The latter is a way of saying that IS builds, while its enemies destroy. It also conveys the message that the international community is working against it and will never allow Muslims to live in a prosperous society. In this way, IS wants to show that its enemies are always unjust no matter what they do: that the outside world is adamantly against Muslims.

As an example, after a April 21 coalition airstrike (which IS describes as a Safavid-Crusader bombing) in the Aden neighborhood of Mosul, IS released a number of pictures of the destruction of civilian property as well as civilians injured, maimed, bloodied, and sitting in hospital beds being treated or dying.[28] IS released similar pictures in Sirte, Libya on both April 23 and 24 related to the destruction of civilian housing and injured and bloodied people as a result of what IS described as 'indiscriminate' bombing by the 'apostate' Fajr Libya, the main Islamist militia in the Libyan civil war.[29] Moreover, IS reported on a variety of other aerial attacks on infrastructure, including a desalination plant in al-Shadadi, Syria, a mosque in Benghazi, Libya, a hospital in Dayr Hafar, Syria, and a school in Dar al-Fatah, Syria.[30]

### *Conclusion*

The picture drawn here is but a snapshot of IS's official media releases for one week. As close observers of IS propaganda will know, this sample is not fully representative of everything IS releases over longer periods of time, but it is more representative than what gets highlighted in Western media. In any case, this inquiry was intended as an illustration that will hopefully inspire other researchers to take a more holistic look at IS media over time. One could go all the way back to 2003, when it was originally Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, or look back to April 2013 when IS officially announced its presence in Syria. Either way, there are some important conclusions that can be made based on the data collated and analyzed above.

Regarding the quantitative section, although 58% (or 19 of 33) of IS's claimed provinces are in Iraq and Syria, there is a disproportionate amount of content coming from those two countries with 81% in total. The majority (78%) of IS-official releases come from its provincial-level media operations. This highlights a more decentralized nature of its media output compared to its methodology more than two years ago. In terms of medium of release, 88% of IS releases are visual (63% picture, 20% video, and 5% graphic), showing the high proportion of emotive media content. Last, through IS's daily news report with al-Bayan Radio Station, IS conducted 258 military operations in 23 of its wilayat, highlighting how its media releases don't often coincide or match what it is doing militarily on a day-to-day basis. This shows the potential asymmetric nature of IS media operations and how it could attempt to alter the perceptions of what it is doing, since it is clearly fighting far less in Syria than in Iraq, let alone its operations outside its core territory.

As for the qualitative side of analysis, within the six key types of methods of IS official media used, when promoting its military related-activities, IS is always on the march and active. There is always progress and

enemies are killed, defeated, or they are taking over territory. IS also highlights military training camps as incubators of future soldiers of the so-called Caliphate that will continue the dominance and the building blocks of a new generation. On the governance and hisba front IS seeks to show that it is competent, conducts swift justice, has the ability to run and build its state, and that life is going on even while a war is continuing in many parts of its territory. The purpose of IS's da'wa activities and messaging is in the service of calling people to the group's interpretation of Islam. It also seeks to educate individuals to return to their 'true' faith and highlight its spreading of its message. Another important avenue of recruitment and cultivation of sympathy is through its promotion of the caliphate campaign to show the ideal nature and environment one is and/or would be living under, its allegedly functioning service capabilities and great life individuals are living as well as the momentum of support it has with continued pledges of allegiance on both the local and global level. Finally, IS characterizes enemy actions as attacks upon "ordinary" Muslims and upon infrastructure within the Islamic State in order to create a visceral pull and reaction for more support.

From this, hopefully, I have provided a sketch of IS's media mechanics, strategy, and capabilities, as well as the range of themes it projects. It is a sophisticated operation that has many components and pieces that will likely continue to evolve and become more advanced as IS further solidifies its control over territory in Iraq and Syria as well as even possibly Libya or elsewhere. As the Islamic State says for its territorial control, so too one can say for its media operations: it is remaining and expanding every day.

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## Notes

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## The Concept of *Bay'a* in the Islamic State's Ideology

by Joas Wagemakers

### Abstract

Given the long roots of *bay'a* (pledge of allegiance) in Islamic tradition and the controversial claim by the Islamic State (IS) to be a caliphate, the application of *bay'a* to the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and his project is a contested issue among radical Islamists. Based on secondary literature and IS ideologues' own writings, this paper analyses IS's claims of validity in their calls for allegiance to "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and how radical Islamist critics of IS have responded to this. IS's arguments resemble quite closely the theories on *bay'a* that its jihadi opponents themselves claim to adhere to. Although the latter take their inspiration from early Islam and far less so from the theories that developed afterwards, it sometimes also appears as if they have idealised the caliphate so much that they find its reality as represented by IS hard to swallow.

**Keywords:** Jihadism, ISIS, ideology, theology, allegiance

### Introduction

After the leader of the Islamic State (IS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared a caliphate (*khilafa*) on 29 June 2014, his spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, stated that "pledging allegiance (*mubaya'a*) and giving assistance to the caliph (*khalifa*) [...] has become incumbent upon all Muslims." [1] Such pledges of allegiance (*bay'a*) have since been given by numerous radical Islamist groups from around the world, including in Afghanistan/Pakistan [2], the Sinai desert [3], North Africa [4] and Nigeria [5] as well as others [6]. Some pledges have been announced on the Internet, others in the real world. [7] IS has also publicly accepted some of these pledges as signs of its expansion [8], although they appear to be carefully vetted and are therefore not always (immediately) approved by al-Baghdadi. [9]

Such expressions of allegiance to IS may give the impression that *bay'a* is something radical Muslims agree upon. This is not the case, however. Given the long roots of the concept in Islamic tradition and the controversial claim by IS to be a caliphate, the pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi and his group is a contested issue among radical Islamists. Based on secondary literature and IS ideologues' own writings, this paper analyses IS's claims of validity in their calls for allegiance to "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This topic has briefly been dealt with by Cole Bunzel in his analysis of IS's claim to be a caliphate [10], but it merits further attention because much of the discussion on IS' legitimacy partly hinges on this concept. In what follows, I will first deal with the meaning and application of the concept of *bay'a* in classical and modern Islam and then show how the Islamic State legitimises the pledge of allegiance to its supposed caliph. As we will see, much of the discussion on *bay'a* pivots around the question of whether or not IS is a legitimate caliphate. Moreover, although its critics are in favour of a caliphate in theory, they seem to shy away from it in practice.

### *Bay'a* in Classical and Modern Islam

The meaning of the term "*bay'a*" is not entirely clear. It is said to refer to the Arabic verb *ba'a-yabi'u* (to sell), which would denote a sort of sale of one's allegiance to somebody else. Others claim it is rooted in the physical act of clasping someone's hand known as "*bay'a*", which was used to indicate the conclusion of an agreement between people and was based on an ancient Arab custom. This latter meaning is said to have been applied to the election of and submission to a leader, which similarly involved the clasping of a person's

hand and was therefore naturally also labelled “*bay‘a*”.[11] It is in the latter sense that early Muslims seem to have used the concept. Milton tells the story of believers pledging allegiance to the Prophet by physically touching Muhammad through the holding of hands. This allegedly led to the revelation of Qur’an 48:18[12], which states that “God was well pleased with the believers when they were swearing fealty to thee (*idh yubayi‘unaka*).”[13]

### *Bay‘a and the Caliphate*

Broadly speaking, this pledging of allegiance to a person of authority has become the practical meaning of the term “*bay‘a*” in Islam. It was first and foremost applied to the Prophet but, after his death, also to other leaders of the Muslim community, primarily the caliph, the successor to the Prophet in political affairs and in upholding Islamic rule. This pledge of allegiance to a caliph would ideally take place through his election, but it could also happen through appointment by his predecessor. According to ‘*ulama*’ (Muslim scholars), the caliph himself had to satisfy several conditions, including ruling on the basis of justice (*‘adala*), possessing knowledge (*‘ilm*) of Islamic tradition and law, having physical and mental fitness, being courageous and determined, waging jihad and being a descendant of the Quraysh tribe, which the Prophet Muhammad himself also belonged to.[14]

The *bay‘a* of a caliph thus constituted a contract (*‘ahd* or *‘aqd*) in which not only the latter was involved as the person receiving fealty, but also those voluntarily expressing the wish to obey their leader. The ‘*ulama*’ differ, however, on the number of people required to pledge allegiance by electing the caliph (*ahl al-ikhtiyar*) for the *bay‘a* to be legitimate, ranging from all “upright men” in Muslim empires to a single person. In practice, the actual electors were mostly officials with senior positions in the caliphate referred to generally as the “people of loosening and binding” (*ahl al-hall wa-l-‘aqd*), whose oaths of fealty were seen as binding upon themselves and the larger Muslim community, particularly since they were not just undertaken towards the caliph, but – by extension – also towards God. As such, scholars saw violating the *bay‘a* as punishable by death, unless the caliph did not live up to his duty to uphold the rules and regulations of Islam, in which case those who pledged allegiance were freed from their obligations towards the ruler.[15]

The seriousness with which (a violation of) the *bay‘a* was treated by the ‘*ulama*’ is a reflection of the strong tradition of obedience (*ta‘a*) to the caliph that had developed in the Sunni Islamic tradition.[16] On the one hand, this can be ascribed to the supposed Qur’anic basis of the caliphate[17], which is said to be found in verses such as Q. 2:30 (“And when thy Lord said to the angels, ‘I am setting in the earth a viceroy (*inni ja‘il fi l-ard khalifa*)’”)[18], as well as the Qur’an’s call on believers to express obedience to such rulers, as in Q. 4:59 (“Oh believers, obey God (*ati‘u llah*), and obey the Messenger (*wa-ati‘u l-rasul*) and those in authority among you (*wa-uli l-amr minkum*)”).[19] On the other hand, such obedience was also inspired by the belief that almost anything (even an unjust and oppressive ruler) was preferable to *fitna* (chaos, strife) and civil war among Muslims in the absence of powerful leadership, which might cause the entire Islamic empire to collapse.[20]

At the same time, however, it was clear that in practice, *bay‘a* could not be expressed to the caliph by every single Muslim, even if the process of pledging allegiance was not confined to a private oath by a limited number of dignitaries (*bay‘at al-khassa*) and a variable number of subsequent public fealty-swearing occasions (*bay‘at al-‘amma*) was added.[21] Moreover, the Muslim world may have been nominally ruled by a caliph, but local leaders soon emerged whose actual power was sometimes greater than that of the ruler himself, further complicating the direct *bay‘a* from the people to the caliph. Given that in classical Islamic

political thought, all power flows down from the caliph and other sources of political authority cannot exist[22], a solution had to be found for this.

Muslim scholars such as al-Mawardi (974-1058) solved the contradiction – between theoretically only having one caliph who enjoys everyone’s allegiance and practically having several actual rulers – by describing local leaders as at least theoretically subservient to the caliph and dependent on the latter’s approval.[23] Later ‘*ulama*’ tended more towards the recognition of the authority of non-caliphal rulers in and of themselves, besides the caliph.[24] In the writings of al-Ghazali (1058-1111), the actual person in power – the sultan – must still pledge allegiance to the caliph, but he is also the one who gets to decide who the caliph should be.[25] The role of the sultan was further increased at the expense of the caliph by the scholar Ibn Jama‘a (1241-1333), who added the usurpation of caliphal power to the other two ways of attaining the caliphate – election and appointment – as a legitimate way of becoming caliph.[26] Under the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923), sultans even came to claim the title of caliph entirely for themselves, taking the usurpation of the caliphate to what could be described as its logical conclusion.[27]

#### *Bay‘a after the Fall of the Caliphate*

The above makes clear that the way the power and position of the caliph was legitimised by Muslim scholars shifted quite dramatically from absolute ruler to nominal leader. Subsequently, so did the means of making a pledge to his successor, changing from *bay‘a* through election of a new caliph or allegiance after the appointment by the previous caliph to implied loyalty to a usurping ruler. The development of Muslim thinking on these issues was greatly influenced by the actual practice of Islamic rule in their time, incorporating political reality into the theory of what constituted a valid *bay‘a*. [28] Thus, it was not a great surprise that the Ottoman sultans, who were clearly not descendants of the Quraysh tribe and therefore did not fulfil one of the conditions of the caliphate, nevertheless made use of the classical *bay‘a* ceremony whenever a new ruler became sultan. [29]

With the annulment of the caliphate by the newly formed Turkish republic in 1924, the whole idea of *bay‘a* to the *caliph* became obsolete. Given the flexible application of the concept, whose use was seemingly always partly a reflection of political considerations and power relations, it was only natural that the rulers of the states that arose in the Middle East after the demise of colonialism would use the concept of *bay‘a* again to legitimise their own rule. [30] Moreover, in the perceived absence of truly Islamic states, Muslim groups and organisations have sometimes also used *bay‘a* to indicate the relationship between their leaders and followers. This has been particularly the case with radical Islamist groups, including al-Qa‘ida [31], whose belief that the rulers of the modern-day Muslim world are “apostates” only strengthens their desire to provide an alternative to them. [32]

Muslim scholars opposed to political parties and certainly radical or violent groups, such as quietist Salafi scholars, reject the application of *bay‘a* to organisational leaders [33] and claim instead that such a pledge should only be given to the ruler, by which they usually mean the king or president of their country. [34] Yet the terms they associate with this pledge – *ta‘a*, *wali l-amr* (ruler) and, of course, *bay‘a* itself – are all strongly linked to the caliph. Thus, while they clearly apply the caliphal mandate to their country’s rulers in practice, they are quite vague about this in theory and have apparently not allowed *bay‘a* to make the theoretical leap from caliph to king. This ambiguity is at least partly kept alive by their use of the term *amir al-mu‘minin* (leader of the faithful), which is a title applied to the caliph but has also been used to describe other rulers. As a consequence, some scholars’ practical application of *bay‘a* to contemporary kings seems to be an acceptance

of reality framed in classical Islamic terms, rather than a new theoretical dimension of an age-old concept. [35] This ambiguity towards the modern-day applicability of *bay'a*, combined with the claim by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to be the new caliph according to at least some of the norms of classical Islam, makes IS' call for allegiance seem at least somewhat plausible. This, in turn, has hampered critics of IS in their efforts to refute the validity of the Islamic State's *bay'a*, to which we must now turn.

### ***Bay'a in IS's Discourse and its Radical Islamist Critics***

The supporters of the Islamic State now label their organisation a caliphate and its leader has assumed the title of caliph. This was not always the case, however, since IS used to be known under various other names, including "the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" (ISIS). Even when the group did not claim to be a caliphate, however, the concept of "*bay'a*" played a significant role in its discourse in a way that sometimes seemed to lay the groundwork for the foundation of the caliphate that was still to come.

#### *Preparing for the Caliphate*

One of the most prominent scholars involved in the debate on *bay'a* of IS (and, before 29 June 2014, ISIS) was the Mauritanian scholar Abu l-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, a prolific scholar about whom little is known other than his early support for ISIS. He stated in early 2013 that founding an Islamic state is important because in it lies "a reminder to the Muslims of the absent caliphate." [36] This theme of having a caliph or imam [37] was developed further in a different document written by al-Shinqiti, in which he stated that appointing such a leader is actually a duty for all Muslims. [38] In fact, al-Shinqiti even stated that "its delay is disobedience (*ma'siya*) through which all Muslims sin" [39], a sentiment that was echoed by other scholars sympathetic to ISIS in early 2014. [40]

The duty to appoint a caliph is followed, according to al-Shinqiti, by the equally necessary act of *bay'a* to a leader who fits all the criteria of such a ruler. Objecting to this, he states, is forbidden and he lists examples from early Islamic history of Muslims rushing to perform *bay'a* to make his point. [41] Al-Shinqiti also explicitly called on other jihadi movements in Iraq and Syria to pledge allegiance to ISIS and stated that maintaining one's independence from that group is not allowed. [42] This is even the case, he claimed, if ISIS can be accused of making mistakes. "Despite that", al-Shinqiti maintained, "the state remains the state. It is entitled to the legitimate pledge (*al-bay'a al-shar'iyya*) and listening to it and obeying it (*al-sam' wal-ta'a la-ha*) is a duty." [43] This need to be obedient to ISIS was also stressed in other writings, with one ISIS-supporting scholar going so far as to state that this group supersedes all other jihadi organisations and that not joining it will result in corruption (*fasad*) and the division of Muslims (*tafriq al-muslimin*). [44] It is therefore not surprising that, in early 2014, the Jordanian scholar 'Umar b. Mahdi Al Zaydan called on Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra – which had been founded by ISIS but later turned against it – to stick to his previous *bay'a* to al-Baghdadi, adding that he was the one that sent al-Jawlani to Syria on his behalf in the first place. [45]

To his supporters, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was more than worthy of people's *bay'a*. The Bahraini scholar Turki al-Bin'ali (also known as Abu Humam al-Athari) [46] praised al-Baghdadi's Qurashi descent, piety, knowledge, jihad experience, leadership, and cooperation skills. [47] Al-Baghdadi's supporters rejected possible obstacles to pledging fealty to al-Baghdadi, such as the argument that ISIS had not settled in enough territory to justify *bay'a* to its leader. The technical expression for this idea is that ISIS lacks *tamkin* (empowerment). *Tamkin*, however, is not a prerequisite for *bay'a*, pro-ISIS scholars argued, because



Muhammad himself did not control any territory and he was nevertheless given the pledge by his followers. [48] Moreover, they pointed out that ISIS does have territory under its control.[49] The same reasoning applied to ISIS's power (*shawka*), which it needs to be able to qualify as a force to be reckoned with (and pledged allegiance to).[50]

The scholars supporting ISIS similarly pointed out that having few *bay'as* from people is not an objection to being viewed as legitimate. As long as a small number pledge allegiance, that suffices.[51] Also, they dismissed the idea that al-Baghdadi should be well known to deserve the *bay'a* and cite the aforementioned medieval scholar al-Mawardi to point out that a ruler need only be known to those directly involved in electing him.[52] Given the flexible rules on how *bay'a* should be given (through election, by appointment or after usurpation), citing al-Mawardi here does not seem out of place, in fact. For similar reasons, the pro-ISIS scholars claimed that the permission of the *ahl al-hall wa-l-'aqd* or the consultation (*shura*) of the scholars is not strictly necessary and only advisable.[53] Moreover, al-Athari claimed that al-Baghdadi did consult '*ulama*' and that they agreed with him.[54]

#### *IS's Post-Caliphate Bay'a*

Given the case pro-ISIS scholars made for the *bay'a* to al-Baghdadi, the founding of a caliphate was perhaps only a matter of time. When it was announced, however, there was a lot of criticism from radical Islamist scholars who supported al-Qa'ida but found the newly announced IS a bridge too far. Some radical Islamist critics point out that they do not object to a caliphate as such, of course, but that IS has created divisions with its caliphate by leaving the overarching framework formed by al-Qa'ida, and they advise its leaders to correct their mistakes and return to that organisation.[55] Others refer to stricter conditions for a *bay'a*-worthy caliphate by pointing out that only succession and election through the majority of the *ahl al-hall wa-l-'aqd* are valid forms of giving allegiance to the caliph.[56]

More interesting than this general criticism is the argument that there already was a caliph: Taliban leader Mullah 'Umar. As Bunzel has shown, after the announcement of the caliphate by IS, al-Qa'ida – clearly aware of IS's challenge to its previously almost undisputed role of jihadi king of the hill – began promoting the view that its first leader, Osama bin Laden, had pledged a "supreme *bay'a*" to Mullah 'Umar, thereby indicating that he was the caliph and that al-Baghdadi's claims were null and void. Although this line of thinking was muddled somewhat by the fact that the current leader of al-Qa'ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had apparently been less unambiguous in his *bay'a* to Mullah 'Umar, the organisation stuck to this defence of their "own" caliphate.[57]

Al-Qa'ida's line of defence against IS's rival caliphate was supported – surprisingly – by one of the staunchest supporters of ISIS: Abu l-Mundhir al-Shinqiti. The latter stated in July 2014 that *bay'a* had been given to Mullah 'Umar and even if his rule was not generally portrayed as a caliphate, this was nevertheless the case because of this pledge. The fact that "unbelievers" were now governing Afghanistan did not diminish Mullah 'Umar's *bay'a* since, in an echo of an argument he had used earlier to defend ISIS, controlling territory is not strictly necessary for a *bay'a* to be valid. All *bay'as*, al-Shinqiti maintained, are subservient to the one given to Mullah 'Umar, who is the legitimate imam whether people call him that way or not, and one therefore cannot simply found a second caliphate.[58] The fact that Mullah 'Umar does not have Qurashi origins is not a problem, al-Shinqiti claimed, since people have already given *bay'a* to him on the basis of the conditions of being an imam and have based their pledge on these.[59] The reality of the *bay'a* to Mullah 'Umar, al-Shinqiti seemed to say, supersedes any claims that al-Baghdadi might have.

Al-Shinqiti's words seemed to contradict his own earlier statement about ISIS: "...the *ahl al-hall wa-l-'aqd* who pledged allegiance to the leader of the state of Islam (i.e., ISIS) called it a 'state'. They did not call it an 'organisation'. Therein lies the clear proof that their *bay'a* is a *bay'a* on the basis of the supreme imamate (*al-imama al-'uzma*), not on the basis of the smaller imamate (*al-imama al-sughra*)."[60] Although al-Shinqiti had, in fact, indicated more than a year before the announcement of IS's caliphate that he believed Mullah 'Umar was "the leader of the faithful"[61], supporters of IS were quick to point out his inconsistency.[62] Some of them argued that the Taliban cannot represent the caliphate because of their supposedly deviant religious views[63]; others pointed out that according to al-Qa'ida itself, the *bay'a* to Mullah 'Umar did not represent allegiance to the supreme imamate, but only to a partial one.[64] Still others stated that the *bay'a* is a contract of which both parties involved want to know the conditions: "How can Mullah 'Umar be caliph when nobody has known that until now!"[65] Another point of disagreement concerned the validity of the *bay'a* to a supposed caliph of non-Qurashi descent. IS supporters insisted that this is a strict condition for the caliphate and thus also for the legitimacy of the *bay'a*. [66] The validity of the latter concept, even though it is claimed by scholars who are ideologically largely alike and is derived from classical Islam, thus remains highly contested.

### Conclusion

The concept of *bay'a* in classical Islam refers to a reciprocal contract between the ruler and the ruled, with the latter giving his allegiance to the leader – usually the caliph – in exchange for protection and political and military leadership. It has its roots in the Qur'an, but mostly also in the practice of medieval Muslim rule, which ensured that the process of *bay'a* – while ideally done through an election of a caliph – developed into a concept that could also be embodied by the appointment of a ruler or even the usurpation of his power. This increasing influence of what could be termed a "might makes right philosophy" was also discernable in the early jurists' conditions for *bay'a* to the caliph, especially his required Qurashi descent, which was often flouted by rulers.

Although various caliphs, modern-day kings and Islamic groups have used the *bay'a* in ways that perhaps deviate from the concept's classical meaning, the theoretical link with the caliph was always maintained. This made it relatively easy for IS to justify its invitation to Muslims to pledge allegiance to its newly founded caliphate in 2014. The fact that IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi claimed to be a caliph seemed to make at least part of the tradition of *bay'a* applicable to him and put the group one step ahead of its radical Islamist critics. It is therefore not surprising that IS's jihadi opponents, in their efforts to dispute the validity of *bay'a* to al-Baghdadi, focused mostly on questioning his claim to be a caliph.

Given the relatively wide-ranging *bay'a* tradition, which is quite tolerant of oppressive and usurping rulers and within which IS seems to fit fairly neatly, the unwillingness of the Islamic State's radical Islamist critics to accept the group's claims is interesting. To be sure, there are real and important ideological differences between IS and its critics. Yet with regard to *bay'a*, IS's arguments resemble quite closely the theories that its jihadi opponents themselves claim to adhere to. Although the latter take their inspiration from early Islam and far less so from the theories that developed afterwards, it sometimes appears as if they have idealised the caliphate to such an extent that they find its reality as represented by IS hard to swallow. If that is indeed the case, it may be easier for them to postpone the announcement of an actual caliphate, to render it largely theoretical and to equate it with a romanticised ideal that might just come about one day.

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- [25] *Ibid.*, 103-4; Rosenthal, *Political*, 39-41.
- [26] Black, *History*, 143-4; Rosenthal, *Political*, 43-4. Scholars such as Ibn Hanbal (780-855) also legitimised the rule of successful usurpers of power a few centuries earlier. See Black, *History*, 84; Landau-Tasserou, *Religious*, 13.
- [27] Black, *History*, 203-7.
- [28] Rosenthal, *Political*, 31, 33, 38.
- [29] Elie Podeh, "The *Bay'a*: Modern Political Uses of Islamic Ritual in the Arab World," *Die Welt des Islams* 50, no. 1 (2010): 125-7.
- [30] *Id.*, 127-48.
- [31] Kévin Jackson, *The Pledge of Allegiance and its Implications*, online at: <http://jihadology.net/2012/07/27/guest-post-the-pledge-of-allegiance-and-its-implications/>, published 27 July 2012 (accessed 27 May 2015).
- [32] One group in Jordan even had the term "*bay'a*" in its name, although this was not used by the members of the group itself. See Joas Wagemakers, "A Terrorist Organization that Never Was: The Jordanian 'Bay'at al-Imam' Group," *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 1 (2014): 63-4.
- [33] Sa'ud b. Muluh b. Sultan al-'Anzi, "Al-Bay'a bayna l-Dawabit al-Shar'iyya wa-l-Tanzimat al-Hizbiyya," *Al-Asala* 8, no. 41 (15 Safar 1424 [18 April 2003]): 34, 36-42; 'Ali Hasan 'Ali 'Abd al-Hamid [al-Halabi], *Al-Bay'a bayna l-Sunna wa-l-Bid'a 'inda l-Jama'at al-Islamiyya* (Amman: Al-Maktaba al-Islamiyya, 1985), 9, 24-5.
- [34] Several quietist Salafi scholars from Jordan have indicated that they are willing to pledge allegiance to King 'Abdallah II if asked to do so, for instance. Interviews with Muhammad b. Musa Al Nasr, Amman, June 2012; Basim b. Faysal al-Jawabira, Amman, June 2012.
- [35] Al-'Anzi, "Al-Bay'a," 34-6; al-Halabi, *Al-Bay'a*, 17-22, 28-30.
- [36] Abu l-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, *Mata Yafqahuna Ma'na l-Ta'a? Allahu Akbar: Nusra li-l'Ilan Dawlat al-Islam*, online at <http://justpaste.it/2dmr>, published 9 April 2013 (accessed 25 March 2014).
- [37] These two words are often used synonymously.
- [38] *Id.*, *Fusul fi l-Imama wa-l-Bay'a*, online at: <http://www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=28121305>, published 10 December 2013 (accessed 2 January 2014), 3-13.
- [39] *Ibid.*, 8.
- [40] Abu Muhammad al-Azdi, *Ahwal al-Mu'aridin li-Dawlat al-Muslimin*, online at: <http://www.facebook.com/1algharibi/post/624591034258357>, n.d. (accessed 26 March 2014), 11-3; Abu Sufyan Turki b. Mubarak al-Bin'ali, *Al-Qiyafa fi 'adam Ishitrat al-Tamkin al-Kamil li-l-Khilafa*, online at <http://www.gulfup.com/?Vh0uaJ>, published 30 April 2014 (accessed 28 July 2014), 1-3.
- [41] Al-Shinqiti, *Fusul*, 26-8.
- [42] *Id.*, *Raf' al-Malam 'an Junud Dawlat al-Islam*, online at: <http://www.gulfup.com/?YilPpd>, published 2014 (accessed 28 July 2014), 3-4, 23.
- [43] *Id.*, *Fatawa bi-la Tayyar..!* online at: <http://www.hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=345664>, published 8 January 2014 (accessed 12 February 2014), 12.
- [44] Abu l-Hasan al-Azdi, *Mujibat al-Indimam li-l-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi l-'Iraq wa-l-Sham*, online at: <http://www.muslim.org/vb/showthread.php?519239>, published 2013 (26 March 2014), 11-21, 29-30;
- [45] 'Umar b. Mahdi Al Zaydan, *Al-Naqd li-Qawl Man Ja'ala l-Khilafa al-Islamiyya min Din al-Rafd*, online at: <http://wp.me/p2hUtu-dm>, published 2 January 2014 (accessed 12 February 2014), 2.
- [46] For more on him, see Cole Bunzel, *The Caliphate's Scholar in Arms*, online at: <http://www.jihadica.com/the-caliphate%E2%80%99s-scholar-in-arms/>, published 9 July 2014 (accessed 28 May 2015).
- [47] Abu Humam Bakr b. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Athari, *Madd al-Ayadi li-Bay'at al-Baghdadi* ([www.tawhed.ws/r?i=05081301](http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=05081301), 2013 (accessed 20 August 2013)), 3-11. See also Joas Wagemakers, *Al-Qaida Advises the Arab Spring: The Case for al-Baghdadi*, online at: <http://www.jihadica.com/al-qaida-advises-the-arab-spring-the-case-for-al-baghdadi/>, published 21 September 2013 (accessed 28 May 2015).
- [48] Al-Athari, *Madd*, 15; al-Shinqiti, *Fusul*, 14; *id.*, *Raf'*, 7.
- [49] Al-Athari, *Madd*, 15; Bin'ali, *Al-Qiyafa*, 4; al-Shinqiti, *Raf'*, 7.
- [50] Al-Bin'ali, *Al-Qiyafa*, 4; al-Shinqiti, *Fusul*, 17; *id.*, *Raf'*, 7.

- [51] Al-Athari, *Madd*, 11-2; al-Shinqiti, *Fusul*, 29-33.
- [52] Al-Shinqiti, *Raf'*, 6-7.
- [53] Al-Athari, *Madd*, 16-7; al-Shinqiti, *Fusul*, 22-5.
- [54] Al-Athari, *Madd*, 17.
- [55] 'Abdallah b. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shinqiti, *Al-Khilafa laysat Hiya l-Khilaf*, online at: <http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=16081402>, published 10 August 2014 (accessed 18 August 2014), 2-5. See also
- [56] Muhammad b. Salih al-Muhajir, *Al-Khulasa fi Munaqashat I'lan al-Khilafa*, online at: <http://www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=29081402>, published 29 August 2014 (accessed 29 August 2014), 2-7.
- [57] Bunzel, *Paper*, 32-4; *id.*, *Al-Qaeda's*.
- [58] Abu l-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, *I'lan al-Khilafa fi l-Mizan al-Shar'i*, online at: <http://justpaste.it/kil-mon>, published 18 July 2014 (accessed 28 July 2014), 1.
- [59] *Ibid.*, 7.
- [60] Al-Shinqiti, *Raf'*, 6.
- [61] Abu l-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, *Man Huwa Amir al-Mu'minin al-Yawm? Wa-Hal Yajibu Tahqiq Shart al-Qurashiyya fi l-Khalifa?* online at: <http://www.tawhed.ws/FAQ/pr?qid=5924>, published 25 May 2013 (accessed 28 May 2015).
- [62] See, for example, Ahmad Bawadi, *Izhar al-Hujaj wa-Ibtal Ma fi Maqal al-Shinqiti min Lujaj*, online at: [http://ahmadbawadi.blogspot.com/2014/07/abawadi\\_19.html](http://ahmadbawadi.blogspot.com/2014/07/abawadi_19.html), n.d. (accessed 28 July 2014); Abu Khubab al-'Iraqi, *Tahqiq al-Mizan fi I'lan Khilafat Dawlat al-Islam*, online at: <http://www.gulfup.com/?Ln2aG2>, published 2014 (accessed 28 July 2014); Abu Salma al-Shinqiti, *Al-Maqal al-Tafsili fi l-Tashkik bi-Ma Nasaba li-l-Shaykh Abi l-Mundhir al-Shinqiti*, online at: <http://www.gulfup.com/?S6LN7V>, published 21 July 2014 (accessed 24 July 2014).
- [63] Abu Maysara al-Shami, *Khilafa 'ala Minhaj al-Nubuwwa am "Khilafa" Qutriyya...*, online at: <http://platformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?p=297363>, n.d. (accessed 28 July 2014).
- [64] *Id.*, *Radd 'ala l-Fattan al-Maftun Wara' al-Kuwalis*, online at: <http://wp.me/p2hUtu-m3>, n.d. (28 July 2014).
- [65] Abu 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ubayda al-Athbaji, *Waqfat Muhadhdhir min Kalam Abi l-Mundhir*, online at: <http://www.gulfup.com/?ttP7jp>, n.d. (accessed 28 July 2014), 6.
- [66] Al-Athbaji, *Waqfat*, 7; Abu 'Umar al-Kuwayti, *Tanbih al-Mujahid al-Mustanfir min Takhliq al-Shinqiti Abi l-Mundhir*, online at: <http://justpast.it/gate>, n.d. (accessed 28 July 2014), 1-2.



## Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State

by Scott Gates and Sukanya Podder

### *Abstract*

*Islamic State relies heavily on the recruitment of foreign fighters. We examine this recruitment from an organizational perspective. We analyze how the process of recruitment of foreigners shapes the adverse selection problem affecting the dissident groups that they join. We also examine the different mechanisms used to maintain the allegiance and compliance of foreigners as opposed to indigenous recruits. More broadly, we analyze how the recruitment of foreign fighters affects the organization. Foreign fighters and local recruits exhibit significant differences in recruitment patterns and motivations for joining IS. This could create problems for the organization. Evidence of such strife, however, is not discernible. Given the information at hand, IS appears to be effectively managing the mix of foreign and local recruits.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, ISIS, foreign fighters, recruitment

Recent reports indicate that over 20,000 foreign fighters have joined militant Sunni organizations in the Iraq/Syria conflict.[1] Most of them have joined the Islamic State (IS). The majority of the foreign fighters are Arabs coming from neighboring countries or the Maghreb. An increasing number of recruits are now coming from the Chechnya and Dagestan regions of Russia with estimates of 2,000 recruits.[2] Around 20% of the foreign fighters are from the West.[3]

Research on foreign fighters or transnational insurgents has tended to focus on the phenomenon in general or as it relates to global jihad. Scholars have focused on trends and numbers, individual decisions and motivations to join an insurgent movement abroad, or security implications.[4] Indeed, most analysis of IS recruitment has focused on processes of radicalization, featuring the individual being recruited. Such analysis is typically framed as a societal problem or a security problem. Few studies have examined how foreign fighters have affected insurgency movements.[5] We frame our analysis as an organizational problem, not as a societal problem or as a (Western) security problem. We limit our analysis to IS in Iraq and Syria, the primary operating environments of the organization.[6] Our focus is on how Islamic State as an organization employs these thousands of foreign fighters and what it means for the organization. How does IS effectively use local recruits from Syria and Iraq and the diverse set of foreign fighters? How does the recruitment of so many foreign fighters affect the organization?

### *Foreign fighters and IS*

David Malet defines foreign fighters as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts.”[7] Thomas Hegghammer builds on this formulation in the following ways: “an agent who (1) has joined, operated within the confines of an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid.”[8] This definition serves to exclude mercenaries, the troops of intervening armies, and “refugee warriors” (i.e. individuals who are connected to the civil conflict but reside in another country).[9] Hegghammer notes at least seventeen instances of jihadist foreign fighter participation in major conflicts since the 1980s.[10]

Transnational insurgents potentially serve to strengthen insurgent groups by contributing resources, fighters, and know-how. However, they can also introduce new ideas and affect the nature and direction of the conflict. This is because foreign fighters differ from local rebels in two important respects. First, they

are selected for ideological commitment (since going abroad to fight is entirely voluntary) and second, they have fewer personal stakes in the conflict (no personal grievances, no land, assets, relatives, or prospects of political office, for example). Indeed, it is this combination of ideological motivation, non-parochialism, and detachment from local politics that can sometimes make foreign recruits attractive for the host group. But foreign fighters can also create a clash of preferences and interests within the organization.[11]

As a rebel organization at war, IS seeks military victory. Unlike many other jihadist groups, such as the Taliban, who seek to hold and govern territory (but within a confined space), IS is the only group that combines rebel governance with expansionist territorial ambitions – to create an Islamic Caliphate. The name of the group belies its ambitions to establish an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria unified by the rule of a Caliph. These territorial ambitions do not involve secession from an existing state, but the eradication of two existing states. Indeed, one of their slogans is “this Khilafa [Caliphate] will have no borders, inshallah, only fronts.”[12] To achieve this goal, the harassing techniques of guerrilla warfare and occasional terrorist acts are inadequate. Holding territory is paramount. And to do that conventional warfare is required, thus IS needs extensive manpower and military equipment. Indeed, the strategic and tactical implications of IS’s goal are significant, as the nature of the insurgency is indelibly affected by such ambitions.

IS is not just engaged in conflict with the governments of Syria and Iraq, it is also in competition with other Syrian rebel groups. And even more relevant to IS, it is in competition with other jihadist groups. For example, it is in the process of cannibalizing the al-Qaeda linked Nusra Front and other small jihadist groups. The “moderate” opposition organized in the Syrian National Council/ Army is marginalized and of little military consequence – especially on the critical Northern front. The Nusra Front competes with IS over recruitment, and though allied at the beginning of the conflict in Syria, they began fighting one another in 2014. The competition is global. In this regard foreign fighters constitute an integral aspect of what IS is, and what it desires to be – *the* global jihadist group. Recruitment from the Middle East and North Africa as well as from the West, reifies the notion of the organization representing—if not constituting—global jihad.

The other issue here is of access. The ease of access into the Syrian warzone is similar to that of the early days of the Bosnian war according to observers. Western youth have travelled into northern Syria via Turkey, flying into Istanbul and transferring to domestic commercial flights or buses for the trip to the border, where they cross through legally or through smuggler routes.[13] This ease of access was due to a number of reasons, including the pre-war integration of the southern Turkish and northern Syrian economies and the complicated border policing task resulting from enormous refugee flows. However, Turkish authorities also displayed a certain leniency toward transiting foreign fighters, at least during the early years of the conflict. This lenient approach was informed by the calculation that such an influx of fighters would help accelerate the fall of the Assad regime. In retrospect, it has proved to be a miscalculation on Turkey’s part, and Turkey has tightened up its border policing arrangements considerably over time.[14]

Apart from the issue of access, popular support for the insurgency in Syria has been strong in the Sunni Muslim world, where mainstream clerics such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi have been allowed by their governments to publicly urge people to go and fight in Syria.[15] Therefore, we must recognize that the foreign fighter phenomenon is linked to broader political dynamics and not simply Jihad or radicalization via social media and virtual propaganda.

The local dimensions of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, however, should not be neglected. Systematic repression and exclusion of the Sunni community by both governments has provided fertile grounds for local recruitment to IS. These local and global aspects of IS work together and compete. Local recruits join for one set of reasons and foreign fighters for another. How does IS address this issue and how does it affect the

organization? Moreover, how does remotely facilitated recruitment through the use of social media affect the organizational stability of IS with respect to both local and foreign recruits?

### ***Social media and the recruitment of foreign fighters***

IS has developed an effective virtual propaganda machinery.[16] Its media arm *Al Hayat* has been releasing videos showing different sides of the militant group. On the one hand is its face of cold terror such as of children holding decapitated heads; on the other are more Western friendly videos of IS militants posing with Nutella jars to demonstrate familiarity with Western lifestyles. More significant, as Zelin shows,[17] is that the majority of propaganda products are about IS providing governance, justice, and new construction. The theme of legitimacy is significant. This propaganda shares a number of key attributes: It tends to use video rather than text, takes full advantage of the linguistic skills of members (sometimes translating statements and videos into European languages), and makes good use of music—all of which appears to resonate with western youth culture. In addition to this, the importance of the ideological call to action cannot be underestimated: it highlights the wrongdoings of the enemy and the good deeds of Islamic State, and also stresses the inadequacies and sins of those that don't go and the qualities and rewards of those who do. While the online propaganda is increasingly important, offline traditional recruitment methods such as writing letters to prisoners and organizing at or around mosques are also being used, often hand in hand with social media campaigns.[18] Finally, the declaration of a caliphate in itself appears to have boosted recruitment further by making the organization seem stronger and more viable.[19]

The vast global social media presence of IS is sustained by significant manpower. Linguistic and technical skills are clearly evident. Obviously some effort is being made not only to recruit foot soldiers, but also to enlist technically proficient and talented users of social media to sustain the machinery of recruitment. Back office managers are often wives and young female supporters.[20]

The profile of foreign fighters is diverse, and can range from ignorant novices who view joining as a rite of passage to diehard militants looking for combat and martyrdom, while individuals that go for humanitarian reasons are often kidnapped or forced to fight.[21] The motivations informing the decision to leave are numerous and they vary and interact in complex ways we probably do not yet fully understand. Motivations may include the prospect of adventure, a desire to impress the local community or opposite sex, a search for identity, feelings of revenge, the search for camaraderie, the desire to make history, and much more. Some also appear motivated by the millennial-apocalyptic promises of IS, as well as by the opportunity to die as a martyr and go to heaven.

While some western born recruits are alienated and disaffected youth, many are not.[22] As a group, European foreign fighters do tend to be socio-economic underperformers – a study of 378 German foreign fighters, for example, found that only a quarter had finished high school and a third had criminal convictions – but there are many exceptions, especially in the UK, where foreign fighters for some reason come from somewhat more affluent backgrounds than their comrades in other European countries.[23]

### ***Fresh recruits: Employing foreign and local fighters***

Once the foreign recruit has arrived in Syria or Iraq, IS as a military and political organization must determine how to most effectively employ the new personnel. One of the main advantages of recruiting foreign fighters is having another pair of boots on the ground. Foreign fighters also bring a diverse set of linguistic skills to the organization further enabling their social media recruitment tactics. Western

recruits also seem to be playing a special role in handling non-Arab hostages and collecting ransom money. Moreover, some recruits will turn out to be effective soldiers and even leaders. Given IS's goal of establishing a new Caliphate and the conventional warfare that such a goal entails, the needs for manpower are considerable.

Recruitment patterns from within territory controlled by IS are different. Direct evidence of local recruitment processes is scarce, but indirect evidence and the experiences of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), al Shabaab in Somalia, and jihadis in Chechnya show that the typical recruit from the IS controlled areas exhibit a different profile than the regional foreign fighters, who in turn, display very different characteristics from the Western volunteers.[24] Foreign fighters from Central Asia are battle-tested and highly regarded soldiers. Inexperienced recruits from the West, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries among other sources can be trained to be excellent combatants, but many will be given tasks that match their skills. Native recruits from Syria and Iraq seem to exhibit stronger anti-Shiite attitudes than the foreign fighters. The global appeal is for Islam and jihad in general, while the local context emphasizes sectarian conflict and threat from the "other". The nature of "what one is fighting for" undoubtedly varies between those recruited from abroad and those recruited from Iraq or Syria. For the foreign fighters, the motivations will be more universal while the natives will be motivated by grievances and a personal history of exclusion. For some native recruits, they might not have joined unless pressed to do so.

Foreign fighters may serve IS by helping to achieve its main goal, to establish the Caliphate. Local recruits have preferences shaped by the Syrian and Iraqi governments as well as by local social networks. Local fighters are more inclined to settle grievances and work to achieve particularistic goals. Foreign fighters are to a greater extent motivated by more ideological goals. These differences could create a rift in the organization as was the case with Al Qaeda in Iraq. AQI failed to accommodate the two cultures. Iraqi Sunnis were critical of AQI for the foreign presence in its leadership and fighting forces and for its attempts to impose its own radical brand of Islam on Iraqis, and its use of extreme violence.[25] So far, IS seems to be managing this potential area of conflict better. In sum, the use of foreign fighters presents an opportunity for IS's leadership. If well integrated into the organization, they can serve to mitigate particularistic motivations and personal vendettas, which run counter to the goals of the organization's leadership.

### ***How IS deals with potential problems with recruits***

The recruitment of foreign fighters affords a number of advantages to an organization, but exposing an insurgent movement to outsiders presents a number of potential problems that must be addressed by the leaders of a rebel group. Two information problems are inherently linked to hierarchical relations in any organization: adverse selection and moral hazard. Adverse selection refers to information about the agent's type. The problem is recruiting the wrong type. Given the very nature of being a foreign fighter, IS will know less about these individuals than about local recruits.

In a rebel organization such as IS with a broad-based global recruitment policy, adverse selection is significant. He might be incompetent. Indeed, a number of foreign recruits have never held a gun in their lives. Many volunteers from the West may actually be a liability in the battlefield. Significant numbers of foreign recruits have no military skills, no familiarity with the terrain, poor language aptitude, and are prone to sickness and unused to harsh conditions.[26]

A recruit could also be a spy or infiltrator. Given the large numbers of foreign fighters, some of whom who are largely ignorant of Islam (the purported *Islam for Dummies* types) or do not know Arabic, an infiltrator

could join with ease. This presents a significant problem for IS. How does the organization determine whether a new recruit is a spy or genuine?

The recruitment of psychopaths or over-zealous recruits is another potential problem. The Arab contingency in Bosnia committed such excesses that they became a political liability.[27] A decade ago, the excesses of al Qaeda in Iraq resulted in a Sunni backlash.[28] Despite the extreme violence committed by IS, the organization does not want to employ an uncontrollable psychopath. Such an individual would pose a threat to his fellow combatants and could create serious rifts in the organization. Clearly crazy types will be identified early, but detecting latent human time-bombs is more difficult.

To mitigate these potential problems, fresh recruits are brought to separate training facilities, segregating foreign fighters and natives. At these training facilities Islamic State recruiters also determine whether a recruit has special skills such as computer engineering, or other social media skills, or whether he is more suited for combat.[29] After the initial vetting, the recruit is assigned a specific job.

IS also uses this time to assess whether a foreign recruit is a spy or not. The problem is how to do so. Given the demands for recruits and the large number of foreign volunteers, the danger of infiltration is not insignificant. Other organizations vet by soliciting costly signs of an individual's complete dedication,[30] and there is plenty of circumstantial evidence that IS does so too. It is reasonable to assume, for example, that one of the reasons IS gets foreign fighters to commit egregious acts (like decapitation), is that it is an effective discriminating sign (since Western intelligence operatives are not allowed to kill on the job in that way). Like many other groups, IS also tries to deter infiltrators by inflicting horrific punishments on suspected spies.

Foreign fighters and native recruits tend to receive different assignments. Reports from officials engaged in battle with IS in Syria state: "The ones actively fighting in the first wave of the attacks, they are mostly using central Asian members" while "Local Arab forces are used to shore up defensive positions,"[31] General Ali al-Wazir Shamaray of the Iraqi army recounts similar experience in his battles against Islamic State forces in Diyala Province: "We often see the foreign fighters in the first wave of attacks and then the Arab fighters will come in after an area is cleared." [32] Suicide bombers, who play a critical role in IS attacks appear to be dominated by foreign fighters.[33] Given these tactics, foreign fighters probably suffer disproportionate casualties.[34]

IS has successfully deployed suicide tactics involving special armored bulldozers, armored Humvees, and VBEIDs (vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices), in conjunction with sniper protection and extensive infantry combat. Such tactics have the added advantage of helping to manage human resources. Someone suspected of being insane only need to conduct the one suicide mission and no longer serves as a threat to other soldiers. Someone regarded as incompetent in combat can be put behind the steering wheel and drive the bomb into the enemy. Similar tactics can be used to test the commitment of suspected spies and infiltrators. IS is thereby able to address the adverse selection problem and successfully employ an effective military tactic.

The following account of recent combat in Ramadi demonstrates how IS tactics succeed:



*On May 5, Islamic State launched an attack on Ramadi's city center, but Iraqi helicopters and the Golden Division repulsed the advance, Iraqi state media reported. Running battles along the bridges across the Euphrates River separating Ramadi's southwestern Islamic State-held neighborhoods from the city center continued for days, with Iraqi forces holding their lines. By May 13, Islamic State had established a team of snipers closer to where Iraqi police and army units were based . . . The next day, Islamic State launched its surge by sending a single armored bulldozer to the concrete barriers on the outskirts of the government lines. The bulldozer worked unimpeded for close to an hour, removing concrete walls, Iraqi officials said. Once the road was cleared, Islamic State fighters drove about six VBIEDs, including an armored Humvee and armored dump truck, into the government complex . . . Over the next 72 hours, the terrorist group set off at least another 20 VBIED and suicide bombs.[35]*

While adverse selection is a significant problem affecting the recruitment of foreign fighters, moral hazard is the bigger problem for native recruits. Moral hazard is about the problem of latent opportunism. In hierarchical relationships the agent will often be presented with the opportunities to shirk his duties. A superior in such a hierarchy will be unable to monitor all activities of subordinates. Rewards alone will not be enough to get around the problem. Punishment certainly can create an incentive, but it depends on being able to monitor the actions of subordinates. The problem is that there is no way that a military organization such as IS would be able to monitor all activities of all members. Bureaucracy alone will never solve the moral hazard problem.[36]

Internalized beliefs can serve as a powerful motivation to not subvert the goals of the organization as a whole. Having been recruited from the local environment, more will be known about these individuals. The information problem for the organization in recruiting locally is not one of adverse selection (i.e. not knowing an actor's type), but one of moral hazard (hidden actions). In this regard, indigenous fighters are much more likely to engage in actions subverting the goals of IS's leadership, given the temptations to engage in vindictive violence, personal vendettas, or selfish gain. The leadership of any organization lacks the resources to adequately monitor the actions of all subordinates. This is especially true of a military organization, where the flow of information is inherently limited through the proverbial fog of war. Hierarchy, bureaucratic oversight, and standard operating procedures are institutional mechanisms whereby an organization attempts to limit the problem of latent opportunism.[37] Indeed, IS is developing an extensive bureaucracy to at least define what counts as insubordination.

In an organization dependent on solidarity and camaraderie, exclusion can serve as an effective mechanism. Humiliation and loss of honor can be powerful punishments. By recruiting large numbers of zealots, these values pervade IS, serving to limit defection and other forms of misbehavior. Indeed, organizations drawing on extremist ideologies exhibit strong patterns of allegiance with little defection or desertion.[38]

### ***Clash between local and global interests***

The presence of these ultra-zealous values held mainly by a minority of soldiers, however, could potentially create serious problems within the organization. A clash of organizational cultures can emerge. As was witnessed earlier in Bosnia and Chechnya, the foreign fighter presence in IS has undermined the indigenous population.[39] Foreign fighters in IS are largely pursuing goals framed within a religious conflict narrative and show little solidarity with the native Iraqi and Syrian's grievances against the government and the sectarian nature of the conflict.[40] Moreover, the superior capacity of some foreign fighters and their better access to weapons, funding, and skills present another manner in which resentment and differences can be magnified. The very qualities that make those foreign fighters attractive to IS could sow the seeds of

factionalism. Strong command structure, devout ideology, and the inculcation of a fierce allegiance to IS by all are ways to address these problems and maintain organizational unity. Military victories also serve as strong unifiers, bonding soldiers towards a common goal of creating the new Islamic Caliphate.

Conversely, losses can sow dissent. In the wake of the Kobani campaign, tension among the ranks of the IS emerged. In-fighting between Uzbek and Chenyans is reported to have killed at least two senior IS officials. The clashes only ended with the intervention of Omar al-Shishani, a prominent Chechen IS commander.[41] Frustration over battlefield setbacks led to this internecine strife among the elite forces of IS.

There are no such reports of native Iraqi/Syrian – foreign fighter (mostly non-native Arabs) conflict within IS yet. The lack of evidence may be because access to insider testimonies and organizational documents is limited at present. Signs of disillusionment among foreign fighters are evident, nonetheless. Richard Barrett suggests that “most foreign fighters arrive with good intentions and often recoil when they witness wrongdoing or brutal tactics by the groups they join. This can spur them to join other groups or simply to return to their home countries disenchanted.”[42] Leaving is a risky strategy. If anyone is caught trying to escape they will be imprisoned or killed. IS has imposed nighttime curfews and erected roadblocks to curb desertions. From September 2014 to February 2015, more than 120 foreign fighters hoping to return home were reportedly killed by IS as reported in a Lebanese news daily.[43] Indeed, some foreign recruits have become disillusioned but to some degree this seems unsurprising given the utopian apocalyptic appeal of the recruitment process. The reality of war certainly isn’t going to be like the virtual world sold by the recruiters and imagined by the recruits.

The potential for warlordism or parochial insubordination by native troops is a real possibility in IS. There are plenty of stories of harsh rule under IS authority, where sanctions against proscribed behaviors are severe. Such behavior is consistent with the organizational goals of IS. We should expect some degree of selective violence and personal vendetta, but that is not what is reported from the towns under IS rule. Reports of warlordism tend to be vague or discussions of its possibility. Information flow from these territories is limited, but we see little significant evidence of widespread conflict between native soldiers and foreign fighters.

### ***Conclusion***

In contrast to most rebel military organizations engaged in armed conflict, IS uses conventional military tactics to secure and hold territory. State-building is the central objective. Hit-and-run tactics of guerrilla warfare or terrorism are inadequate. In order for IS to achieve its expansionist territorial goal, it requires tremendous manpower. Boots on the ground are not enough. IS needs a dedicated fighting force willing to engage in self-sacrifice. Foreign fighters serve this role. IS draws on the military experience and prowess of Central Asians forming the bulk of the front-line of attacking forces and snipers. Less experienced foreign recruits are used as suicide bombers driving heavily armed Humvees and VBIEDs.

To recruit these foreign fighters, IS has developed an extensive social media recruitment machine. Drawing on linguistic and technological talent, the recruitment net is cast around the globe. The declaration of the new Caliphate and military victories serve to enhance the effectiveness of IS’s recruitment efforts. Foreign fighters are given the more dangerous roles in the organization, but to a large extent this is a role they want. Worse would be to be left out of the fight.

IS’s reliance on foreign fighters has fundamentally altered the organization. Yet, there are few signs thus far that IS has been weakened by a clash of interests between foreign fighters and native recruits. There is,

however, a potential for internal conflict to emerge between native IS soldiers and foreign fighters. So far though, IS has maintained the establishment of the Caliphate as the ultimate goal, which serves the interests of all parties, the Syrians fighting Assad's regime, the Iraqis motivated by sectarian cleavages, and foreign zealots.

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## The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence

by Aymenn al-Tamimi

### Abstract

*This paper traces the development in Islamic State administration from the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006 until the present day. The paper draws on rare primary sources to explain the growing sophistication in the group's governance structures. The current bureaucratic system has reached a level of complexity and professionalism that probably makes the Islamic State sustainable, even under containment, provided it maintains control of its strongholds.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, ISIS, Iraq, Syria, rebel governance, bureaucracy

### Introduction

Since the 1980s, jihadist groups have attempted to govern their territories and provide services to locals. Some proclaimed state entities, most often in the form of an Islamic 'emirate': a localized entity that is supposed to be subordinate to the Caliphate.[1] This paper examines the governance structures of the largest jihadi state-building project to date: the Islamic State (IS). For such an entity to function and survive, administration will be a key part of its order. This has been a prominent theme in the Islamic State's own propaganda and one which came to the forefront during the ISIS era.

Studying the IS administration is important for two main reasons. For one, Islamic State is a prominent case of the general phenomenon of rebel governance, a topic that remains underexplored in the social science literature and that may hold clues to why some insurgent groups perform better than others. For another, this inquiry can shed important light on the organizational structure and long-term viability of the Islamic State, issues that have direct implications for the policy debate about how the international community should deal with IS.[2]

The existing literature has provided descriptive snapshots of the IS administration, but lacks a thorough analysis of its evolution over time.[3] This paper therefore traces the evolution of the administration through its many prior incarnations, beginning with Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's *Jamaat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad* (1999), followed by al-Qa'ida in Iraq (*Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*: AQI, 2004), the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (2006), the Islamic State of Iraq (*Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiya*- ISI, 2006 post-Zarqawi), the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (*al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham*- ISIS: 2013) and finally the Islamic State (IS: 2014 till present). In the course of this evolution, one goes from a mere group (*jamaat*) through to an Islamic emirate in ISI, and finally an entity that is now claiming to be the Caliphate.

This article attempts to answer these questions by relying on primary IS source documents, and mainly those not released in an official capacity by IS' media wings. These are documents that have been released online by pro or anti-IS activists, or sent to this author in a private capacity. Non-officially-released IS documents are useful because they can shed more critical light on the nature of IS administration. The main limitation here is that the total number of documents unearthed thus far is still likely to be only a small fraction of the total number of administrative documents issued by IS in its various state departments, and ever more granular analysis will have to be reserved for future years, particularly if IS is driven out of its key strongholds and outside forces can seize caches of documents for research.

The article is structured chronologically, starting with the first official claim to statehood by ISI in 2006 and continuing right through to the present day. I make two arguments: first, the documentary evidence represents a growing sophistication over time, and second, the current model seems sustainable and resistant to internal collapse if IS control of its strongholds is allowed to continue. In this regard, I dissent from the assessment of Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob Shapiro that “from an economic perspective, Daesh [IS] is extremely unlikely to be sustainable.”[4] This is not to portray IS as having a model economy, but rather to say IS can probably sustain control over its territories because the quality of life there was low to begin with.

### *ISI and its Ministries: 2007-2011*

As noted above in the summary timeline, the transition to ISI in 2006 headed by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi represents a key turning point in self-presentation: from a mere group to an actual state. Concomitant with this change in official image was the establishment of the first cabinet of ministries in April 2007. These ministries were as follows: first ministry, war ministry, public relations ministry, public security ministry, media ministry, oil ministry, Shari’a Committees ministry, martyrs and prisoners ministry, agriculture and fishing ministry, and health ministry.[5]

In keeping with the notion of good governance, an image of technocratic government was presented: thus the oil ministry was headed by “the engineer Abu Ahmad al-Janabi,” while the health ministry came under the leadership of “the doctor professor Abu Abdullah al-Zaidi.”[6] Further, the names reflected to a large extent the ‘Iraqization’ trend that tried to move away from the image of an unwelcome, foreign jihadi force: thus both the public relations and oil ministers are Janabis (associated with Iraqi Sunnis), the media minister a Mashhadani (from a Sunni area of north Baghdad), and the martyrs and prisoners an Issawi (from Anbar). [7] The main exception in this regard was Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, the war minister, an Egyptian by origin.

However, it is naturally questionable how far these ministries translated to real administration on the ground. Indeed, ISI seemed to acknowledge as such in a tract entitled “Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State,” a study released by ISI in 2006-7 under the supervision of Shari’a Committees official Uthman bin Abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi.[8] The treatise cites a number of Islamic texts to justify the necessity of establishing an Islamic state,[9] and claims that: “After more than three years of jihad in Iraq, the mujahideen have by the granting of success from God been able to reach an appropriate level of organizational, military, administrative, economic and media capabilities and preparations that they have not attained before.”[10] Yet “despite the fact that we say this, we realize completely that the basis on which the Prophet...relied in the establishment of his first state did not possess the supreme fields of knowledge, worldly specialties, and material capabilities of that time, but rather his enemies were far ahead of him in this regard, but that was not a reason to put a stop to the destiny of the state and its project.”[11] That is, ISI was already acknowledging its own limitations in functioning as an actual state but used Islamic precedent to justify the legitimacy of its declaration.[12]

This problem was compounded by the rise of the Sahwa (Awakening Movement) among Iraq’s Sunnis, which in coordination with coalition forces played a crucial role in ‘rolling back’ ISI over the period 2007-2009, though not destroying or defeating the organization entirely. Rather, as Brian Fishman puts it, the net effect of the surge and the Sahwa was that these developments “pushed it out of its former safe-havens and inhibited its ability to hold territory.”[13]

In September 2009, ISI announced its second appointment of cabinet of ministers, acknowledging its losses since 2007 in a video release: “After the announcement of the first Islamic government, the Islamic State has been subjected to painful stabs from every side, but has endured over the wounds, has taken heart over the

pains and has recovered, and has arisen on the leg of earnestness for jihad in the path of God and defending the religion of God.”[14]

The second cabinet of ministers comprised first and war ministries, Shari’a committees, public relations, prisoners and martyrs, security, health, media, oil and finance. The names of the ministers are different from the first cabinet except for the appointment of Abu Hamza al-Muhajir in combined roles as first and war ministers.[15]

Despite the severe weakening of ISI capabilities, the group remained capable of carrying out deadly terrorist attacks, and reports of ISI entrenching itself in Mosul as a criminal enterprise extorting money from businesses, together with ongoing oil smuggling, were already becoming apparent in 2009.[16] These problems only continued and intensified as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became new ISI leader by ISI Shura Council appointment in May 2010 following the deaths of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir[17] and as the U.S. troop presence drew down. In September 2011, the Iraqi-German investigative outlet *Niqash* reported that every pharmacy owner paid between 100 and 200 dollars a month to ISI, while contractors paid 5-10% from every contract assignment to ISI: extortion also came upon hotels, doctors, and shopkeepers.[18]

The pervasiveness of the enterprise readily casts into doubt the central government’s real control over Mosul during these years. It is a significant aspect of ISI’s deep entrenchment in Mosul and the wider Ninawa province, coming not only at the expense of Baghdad but also ISI’s rival insurgents, many of whom also had an established presence in Mosul but lacked ISI’s financial resources and operational capabilities. These rivals included the jihadist Jamaat Ansar al-Islam and the Ba’athist Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqat al-Naqshbandia. Though ISI was in no position at the time to subjugate these groups totally, the point about entrenchment partly explains why ISI’s successor ISIS so quickly became the dominant power in Mosul following the city’s fall in June 2014.

In sum, by 2011 it would still not have made any sense to characterize ISI as an actual state even as Mosul and Ninawa province had clearly emerged as its main hub, but rather its status was akin to a Mafia organization, not yet governing any major towns or territory where it could display the workings of most of its supposed government ministries. The self-presentation as a state is in any case important for understanding an ideological basis for ISI and its successors’ disputes with rival groups that did not make claims to being an actual state: since ISI and its descendants already saw themselves as being of a higher status, independent arbitration of disputes and compromise would be impossible in the long run. These problems became much more apparent with the expansion of ISI into Syria and the declaration of ISIS in April 2013, after which the first real signs of proto-governance began to emerge.

### ***The Syrian Civil War and ISI Expansion***

The outbreak of the Syrian insurgency in 2011 provided ample opportunity for ISI to expand and establish a safe haven, which would later prove beneficial to campaigns on the home front in Iraq. From this outlook came the birth of Jabhat al-Nusra sometime in summer 2011 as Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani (of Syrian origin) was dispatched along with a number of ISI operatives into Syria.[19] The question of whether this decision to expand into Syria was made in coordination with al-Qa’ida Central (AQC) remains controversial and part of an ongoing ‘war of the narratives’: in what is now the Islamic State’s telling, it was wholly the work of ISI as there was no allegiance to AQC anyway since 2006, while AQC and its supporters insist that ISI leader Baghdadi had affirmed his allegiance to AQC and authority ultimately lay with AQC leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Regardless, it is not in the scope of this paper to delve in-depth into this subject.

Unsurprisingly, the route of migration into Syria appears to have been the Ninawa-Hasakah corridor,[20] again reflecting Ninawa's status as ISI's main hub in Iraq. Indeed, it was also used by Jama'at Ansar al-Islam to establish its own Syrian branch, with the al-Qaa'qaa' training camp set up in al-Hewel in Hasakah along the border with Iraq.[21]

However, the strategy of Jabhat al-Nusra was quite different from ISI and did not involve claims to statehood. Instead, the group aimed to intertwine itself with the broader rebellion, coordinating with most other factions. It remained open to power-sharing in areas captured from the regime, while providing services and da'wah outreach to locals. Pursuing this gradualist approach, Jabhat al-Nusra gained widespread legitimacy as a valuable asset to the rebellion, even as U.S. intelligence correctly identified it as originating from ISI, hence the terrorist designation in December 2012.[22] In turn, Jabhat al-Nusra's success in Syria, combined with a desire to prevent the group from seemingly becoming too powerful to stand up for its autonomy, is likely what prompted Baghdadi's calculation to announce unilaterally via al-Furqan Media the merger of ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra to form ISIS in April 2013, although there had probably been a good deal of agitation behind the scenes prior to the audio message.

With the rejection of the merger by Jabhat al-Nusra and AQC, Baghdadi nonetheless persisted with his ISIS project, winning over a number of defecting Jabhat al-Nusra factions to build an ISIS presence in northern Syria. The most significant losses for Jabhat al-Nusra to ISIS were in Raqqa province, but what had clearly emerged as Syria's official al-Qa'ida affiliate retained the loyalty of virtually all its contingent in Deraa province in the far south.

It is at this stage, in the spring of 2013, that the first signs of ISIS administration emerge. It is important to recognise here that the ISIS strategy for expansion also entailed a degree of gradualism, as in the majority of places where ISIS had a presence it was only one among multiple factions. Central to the first stages of an ISIS presence in a given area was the establishment of a da'wah office, which would not only function as a means of social outreach and recruitment of members of the local population, but also as a front for gathering intelligence on ISIS rivals in the local area, plainly with the intention of undermining and destroying them. This approach was recently the subject of an article by Der Spiegel reporter Christoph Reuter, who attributed it to blueprint plans purportedly written by Baghdadi's deputy Hajji Bakr. The plans also envisaged a sophisticated security apparatus in each of ISIS's regions.[23]

Regardless of whether these plans actually guided ISIS strategy, there is no denying the importance of the da'wah office to the growth of ISIS in 2013. Two notable cases are the towns of Raqqa and Azaz. In the former, ISIS co-existed with Ahrar al-Sham, Ahfad al-Rasul (which ISIS expelled in August 2013 while Ahrar al-Sham largely stood by) and Jabhat al-Nusra (which 'returned' in September 2013). Here, ISIS became known for its da'wah office that erected billboards in the city advertising its ideals, such as the need for women to dress modestly, the importance of implementing God's law, not man-made law, and so on.[24] The da'wah office also served as a means to undermine rivals and small protests against ISIS quickly arose in Raqqa to protest the detention of relatives likely linked to rebel factions. Concomitant with the da'wah office and its setting up of billboards was outreach to locals in the mosques, and aiming to give the impression of transparency, ISIS offered to receive complaints about its members' conduct in the Nawawi mosque in Raqqa.

In Azaz, which ISIS entered at the beginning of July 2013, the main rival to contend with was the local Northern Storm Brigade, whereas Abu Obeida al-Masri's jihadi faction Jaysh Muhammad in Bilad al-Sham seems to have been quite sympathetic to ISIS, which established a da'wah office in Azaz that recruited from opponents of Northern Storm. At the same time, ISIS was coordinating with Northern Storm in the siege

of Mennagh airbase, and the local ISIS amir for the Azaz area- Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Kuwaiti initially had friendly relations with Northern Storm leader Samir Amouri.[25]

By September, ISIS felt strong enough to attempt a full-on takeover of the town by force, on the pretext that a German doctor working in Azaz was a spy. Though seeming to accept a ceasefire agreement mediated by Liwa al-Tawhid, ISIS displayed its contempt for independent mediation in violating the agreement and expelling Northern Storm from the town completely, establishing the “Emirate of Azaz” and appointing a local boy – Murad Hallaq – as head of intelligence to hunt down Northern Storm members and supporters who did not repent.[26] The concept of an “emirate” was a key ISIS designation for towns it controlled as strongholds prior to the declaration of the Caliphate, and points to the projection of a forthcoming Caliphate. Quite tellingly, one of the slogans ISIS publicised after the capture of Azaz was: “The promised project of the Caliphate.”

Another familiar feature of the ISIS presence in a locality where it co-existed with other factions would be the Virtue and Vice Committee/the Islamic Court. For instance, in the northern border town of Tel Abyad, ISIS co-existed alongside Ahrar al-Sham and other local rebel formations, later working together with them to expel the Kurdish militia presence in August 2013. Here, ISIS established an Islamic Court, issuing an edict in December 2013 detailing restrictions on women’s clothing. Where ISIS had a presence alongside other factions, Islamic Court could serve as an alternative form of justice to which residents could address their complaints about individuals or members of ISIS, besides being able to license marriages. This was also the case with Deir az-Zor city, where ISIS established its Islamic Court in October 2013.[27] Of course, ISIS Islamic Courts also existed in places where it had strongholds, such as in Azaz[28] and al-Dana.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that ISIS administration existed as an entirely separate entity from the wider Syrian insurgent milieu and governing bodies in rebel-held areas. On occasion, one can find joint statements issued with other governing bodies: for example, in November 2013, a joint statement was put out by ISIS, the Shari’a Committee, and the “military council” in the name of the “Free Syrian Army,” calling on the people of Manbij to strengthen the town and area defences against a potential advance by regime forces. [29] A similar statement can also be found for the town of al-Bab, with joint signatures from ISIS, Ahrar al-Sham and other entities.[30]

Nonetheless, the increasingly assertive state-like behaviour of ISIS, such as its attempts to gain monopolies on the making and supplying of bread in a given town,[31] did not escape the attention of already existing administrative bodies, members of whom might be subject to arrest at the hands of ISIS. In this context came a notification in October 2013 from the Shari’a Committee for the al-Bab area, explicitly affirming: “We do not acknowledge the so-called organization of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham as a state but rather as a fighting faction who are brothers to us. To them is our property and upon them is what is upon us.”[32] This reportedly came in response to ISIS’ arrest of a judge and five other members of the committee who had been seeking out a wanted person, an individual who had pledged allegiance to ISIS and thus sought protection. [33] Similarly, in Manbij, a number of factions including Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa Fursan al-Furat, and the “revolutionary and military council” issued a statement in late August 2013, declaring ISIS in the town to be a “military faction like the rest of the factions,” forbidding interference in any “civil and service matters” and calling on ISIS to respect the authority of the “revolutionary and military council” by handing over any seized public and private property.[34]

Despite ISIS’ increasingly aggressive behaviour in Syria towards other factions through 2013, the evidence does not justify describing ISIS as an actual state at this point. The group certainly controlled some important strongholds near the border with Turkey as ‘emirates’ in which some services, legal administration and



enforcement of Islamic morality could be provided, but in the majority of places ISIS was only one of a number of factions and had to rely primarily on proselytization to assert itself, while aiming gradually to subvert rival groups. Real territorial holdings tended not to be contiguous and there is no suggestion of a centralized or consistent system of administration to cover the entirety of its areas of control and presence in Syria. The picture was to change with the outbreak of infighting between rebels and ISIS at the start of 2014.

### *Infighting and Consolidation of the State*

It is evident from ISIS' *modus operandi* in Syria in 2013 that the strategy for expansion and development was considered a slow, step-by-step process premised on the belief that such an approach would avoid a coordinated backlash from Syrian rebels analogous to the Sahwa movement. Initially it worked: After seizing towns such as Jarabulus, Azaz and ad-Dana, ISIS did not face substantial opposition from the rebels as a whole. Frequently, ISIS coordinated with other factions during offensives in Latakia, Qalamoun and Aleppo province, and those of Islamic Front and jihadi orientation in particular were reluctant to turn against ISIS openly, and ISIS sometimes played on notions of 'brotherhood' in holding joint da'wah meetings with Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham in Aleppo under the auspices of Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaysini.[35] However, continued ISIS encroachments, coupled with the killing of Abu Rayan—a widely respected figure from Ahrar al-Sham[36]—quickly escalated into widespread infighting across northern and eastern Syria between ISIS and other factions, such that even Jabhat al-Nusra actively fought against ISIS. The only exceptions were localized: the Qalamoun area and (for a brief time) the far north Hasakah province. The infighting also led to the official disavowal by al-Qaida Central of any links with ISIS.

A good deal of exaggeration continues to surround the scale of the infighting. The end result was a redrawing of positions in which ISIS withdrew from Idlib, Latakia, Hama and Deir az-Zor provinces, consolidating its territory around Raqqa city—which would become its de facto capital—as well as southern Hasakah province and eastern Aleppo province. In analytical terms, however, this redrawing of positions should not be viewed as representing significant defeats for ISIS, but rather a shift in strategy focusing on the control of contiguous territory and strongholds, contrasting with the previously thin spread in which ISIS was only one of a number of factions in the vast majority of places it had a presence. The 2013 approach for expansion was now obsolete. The regrouping in Syria also coincided with the beginnings of major expansion in Iraq, where ISIS coordinated with other insurgent groups to seize control of Fallujah. In Fallujah, ISIS adopted the same gradual subversive strategy it had employed in Syria, setting up an Islamic Court in the city and eventually dominating the city through assassinations of rivals, seizures of weapons caches and outreach to locals.[37]

In Syria though, the need to subjugate rivals in the new strongholds demanded first and foremost the securing of loyalty through official demonstrations of repentance, and many of the administrative documents in this period focus on this issue. Together with repentance comes the issue of ideological affinity with ISIS. Thus, for example, we have from a newly developed Diwan al-Awqaf (a department dealing with religious matters: in this case also the 'Diwan Khidamat al-Muslimeen'- Muslims Services Department) in al-Bab a document for the affirmation of faith, declaring rejection of all other religions except Islam, rejection of Assad and rejection of Sufism.[38]

With the consolidation of territory and strongholds also comes the emergence of more state-like institutions. For example, in the realm of education, ISIS began setting up Shari'a Institutes, including for women, appearing to be tied to da'wah offices.[39] Moreover, implementation of Islamic law at a stricter level than in the 2013 era becomes apparent. In March 2014, ISIS in al-Bab issued a statement obliging shops to close during prayer time. Further, in the Manbij area of the eastern part of Aleppo province, ISIS issued a

statement in February 2014 prohibiting gender mixing, particularly in schools, institutes and colleges, giving officials in these bodies a deadline of a week to comply.[40] The signature in this case is that of Abu Luqman, who, as noted by the NGO Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, was appointed by ISIS to manage affairs in eastern Aleppo countryside after the regrouping in the wake of the infighting.[41] The following month, ISIS' Islamic judiciary in al-Bab introduced a list of *hudud* punishments for various crimes, including 80 lashes for consumption of alcohol, the death penalty for blasphemy, amputation of hands for theft, and the possibility of death penalty and crucifixion for highway robbery.[42] The display of these harsh forms of justice first gained notoriety in Raqqa in April 2014 with the killing and crucifixion of men accused of planting IED bombs against ISIS, meriting the punishment of crucifixion according to Qur'an 5:33.[43]

ISIS' ambition to develop public services also becomes more apparent. In Raqqa during 2013, ISIS had more or less left alone the local council that came into being after the fall of the city from regime control to manage the realm of the public services of water and electricity,[44] but with the ISIS takeover of the city, the local council appears to have been subject to co-optation and reformation at the hands of ISIS.[45] They also established Islamic Services Committees to oversee electricity supply, health spending, education, street cleaning, and food provision. Again, reflecting a certain concern for good governance, ISIS opened an office for this committee in April 2014 to which residents in Raqqa could address complaints.[46] In a similar vein, in its Aleppo province stronghold of Jarabulus, ISIS set up a public services administration building in May 2014.[47]

Meanwhile, in Iraq, ISIS' ever growing assertiveness saw da'wah outreach in mosques and in the open to locals in certain parts of the country. Further, a shadowy ISIS "Shari'a Committee" in Mosul issued various political statements, such as the call for residents not to vote in the 2014 parliamentary elections. In August 2013, this committee also issued an injunction against shops selling inappropriate dress for women.[48]

Thus, the aftermath of the infighting with Syrian rebels actually saw the further entrenchment of ISIS and growth in its state-like presentation, moving beyond the heavy focus on da'wah outreach and intelligence subversion and now assuming more characteristics of a real state, with more extensively claimed provision of public services and stricter enforcement of its ideals of morality and public conduct. That said, the extent of service provision was not the same across all ISIS territories, and an element of centralization and coordination seems somewhat lacking. This was to change with the rapid ISIS advances across northern and western Iraq in the summer of 2014, beginning with the fall of Mosul, and the acquisition of significant contiguous territory spanning the borders of Iraq and Syria, ultimately prompting the declaration of the Caliphate at the end of June 2014.

### ***Caliphate and Diwans: Embodying Statehood***

After the declaration of the Caliphate, documentary evidence shows the emergence of various so-called Diwans: institutions corresponding to government departments or ministries. The image of governance presented is accordingly much more comprehensive, pointing to local administrations of various realms of daily life that may also answer to higher central departments whose authority in the issuing of edicts should span the entirety of Islamic State territory. Table 1 represents the various Diwans that can be identified, with a brief description of each Diwan's functions. Beyond the Diwans, there were other government bodies of note, such as the General Supervisory Committee that seems to have the authority to issue general notifications to the various Islamic State provinces, such as a ban on GPS and Apple devices in December 2014.[49]

Government Department	Function
Diwan al-Ta'lim	Education
Diwan al-Khidamat	Public Services (e.g. electricity, water, street cleaning). Management of public facilities (e.g. parks)
Diwan al-Rikaz	Precious resources (two known divisions: fossil fuels and antiquities)
Diwan al-Da'wah wa al-Masajid (wa al-Awqaf)	Da'wah activity and control of the mosques
Diwan al-Sihha	Health
Diwan al-Asha'ir	Tribal outreach
Diwan al-Amn (al-Aam)	Public security
Diwan Bayt al-Mal	Finances and currency system
Diwan al-Hisbah	Enforcement of public morality: Islamic police
Diwan al-Qada wa al-Mazalim	Islamic court, judicial matters, marriages
Diwan al-Alaqat al-Amma	Public relations
Diwan al-Zira'a	Agriculture, environment
Diwan al-Ifta' wa al-Buhuth	Fatwas, textbooks for training camp recruits etc.
Diwan al-Jund	Military and defence

Table 1: Diwans and their Functions

The Diwan al-Ta'lim perhaps illustrates best the point about notions of a centralized administration with representations at the local (i.e. provincial and regional-provincial) level. The central Diwan al-Ta'lim is currently headed by a figure known as Dhu al-Qarnain, a German citizen of Egyptian origin who was part of the original Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi network in Iraq.[50] The decision to outlaw the teaching of certain subjects in schools and other educational institutions across the provinces, as well as the announcement of job opportunities in education across the provinces and the marking of the beginning of the next academic year, all bear his signature in the documentary evidence.[51] The Diwan al-Ta'lim may have to decide at the local level (for example) what the registration fees for schools in a certain area will be, but the question of curriculum has already been definitively determined by Dhu al-Qarnain.

Similarly, the Diwan al-Amn at the central administration level issued the notification to all the provinces calling for the killing and wounding of Jordanian pilots after the advertised burning alive of Muadh al-Kasesbeh,[52] but this Diwan also exists at the provincial level and can make decisions based on the local circumstances. In Ninawa province in Iraq, for example, the Diwan is keen to monitor Internet shop users and has demanded that shop owners seek the four Iraqi ID documents from them and have them verified so they can be presented to the local Diwan on requirement. The ID documents only make sense in the Iraqi context, not spanning the whole Caliphate.[53] Contrasting somewhat with the Diwan al-Ta'lim and the Diwan al-Amn, the Diwan al-Ifta' wa al-Buhuth is by nature a single, centralized body, issuing fatwas for the notification of all inhabitants of the Islamic State, dealing with a variety of questions such as the permissibility of eating meat imported from Turkey and playing table football.

With this structure, the declared Caliphate looks a lot more like a real state than its ISIS predecessor. Indeed, the sheer range of documents that has emerged over the past year covers a broad range of domains, including regulations on fishing, tax forms for electricity services, licenses for excavation of antiquities, phone subscriptions, fees for sanitation services, agricultural crop plans, unified Friday sermons, vaccination programs, and fixing rent rates for property.[54]

Of course, the documents cannot be taken simply at face value and deserve critical analysis on a case-by-case basis. Take the Diwan al-Sihha: the vaccination programs on offer in Syria may seem superficially impressive, but in fact they do not differ from the already existing system under the regime.[55] The Diwan al-Ta'lim-issued exam timetables for Mosul University do not reflect a reinvigorated university system but rather a change of education department label with a shrinking of the university through closure of certain departments. Likewise, when it comes to services offices, the issue is often not so much a complete overhaul at all levels by the Islamic State, but rather the already existing employees of those offices in a given city/town (e.g. Mosul) are compelled to work under threat of confiscation of one's home and thus come under the label of Diwan al-Khidamat.[56] On the other hand, the requirement to work helps win support from local residents unhappy with inefficient public services under the Iraqi government.[57] Even so, IS is helped considerably by the fact that the central government continues to pay the salaries of public employees in IS-controlled areas.[58]

### *Conclusions*

Whatever the shortcomings of Islamic State administration, we can see an evolution over time from a criminal organization subsisting on extortion, into a group controlling pockets of territory and primarily relying on da'wah activity and subversion of rivals, and finally becoming an entity controlling large swathes of territory and major towns spanning the Iraq-Syria border with a diverse range of bureaucratic departments. The current situation presents IS' opponents with several challenges to consider.

First, the harsh justice and rigid security apparatus help bring a sense of order to areas in Syria especially that have known little but the chaos of war and competing factions for the past four years. This has severely blunted the prospects of internal opposition undermining the Islamic State's rule from within. Local rivals, such as the Shaitat tribe in Deir az-Zor province, are put down with ruthless efficiency, as the Islamic State's tribal outreach embodied in its Diwan al-Asha'ir can also play off members of the same tribe against each other. In Iraq too, local opposition is not forthcoming: we are no longer in the era of the Iraq War when other powerful insurgent factions existed, many of whose members went on to constitute the Sahwa forces. Instead, through a mixture of coercion and co-optation, those other factions have virtually ceased to exist on the ground.

Second, the extent of state administration provides abundant avenues for revenue, above all in the form of taxation. Whether one considers school registration fees, fines for traffic violations, paying for garbage disposal or jizya taxes in Raqqa, sources of revenue clearly go far beyond the conventional descriptions of a criminal outfit primarily making money through smuggling of oil and antiquities. Indeed, the Islamic State has incorporated the fields of oil and antiquities into its bureaucracy. Thus, disruption of oil infrastructure through airstrikes may reduce Islamic State revenues, but it does not seem to have fatally undermined its finances: rather, it can easily resort to greater taxation to compensate, as recent anecdotal evidence seems to suggest. Seriously hurting IS economically would require one of two things: either a large-scale, casualty-heavy bombing campaign targeting IS infrastructure or alternatively, the complete sealing off of IS from the outside world. Both seem currently unfeasible, the former for political reasons, the second for practical ones, though with regard to the latter, there may be some merit to Shapiro and Hansen-Lewis' suggestion that the Iraqi government should compensate government employees in IS-held areas in "goods which are less liquid than cash" as a way to stifle IS income without virtually depriving the population of its livelihood.

Finally, the evolution in Islamic State administration in Iraq and Syria can provide a model for assessing the development of Islamic State affiliates abroad. That is, one can think of the development of the Islamic State

abroad in three stages: activist support, military presence, and finally administration. The first two stages frequently overlap, but the emergence of Islamic State Diwan institutions abroad may help indicate where the brand is most successful and developed. Thus in Libya, Islamic State Diwans have emerged in Cyrenaica[59] and Tripoli provinces.[60] No other Islamic State affiliate has quite attained this level of sophistication, and it is clear that in some cases the Islamic State has not accepted pledges of allegiance to create new provinces because it does not see any realistic chance of the affiliate developing a state-like presence in its zone of operation. Two cases-in-point here are Gaza and India. In Gaza, a number of very small pro-IS factions exist that have been unable to unite under one banner, and hence are deemed too insignificant by the Islamic State to have their allegiances officially accepted. In India, a small group called Tanzim Ansar al-Tawheed pledged allegiance in October 2014, but lacking any capabilities beyond online activism in so vast a territory, it has not been accepted to form an ‘India Province.’[61]

To sum up, IS appears to have set up an administration that is very sophisticated as far as rebel groups go, one that is capable of enduring for years unless subjected to direct military attack. At the same time, it is difficult to see how this bureaucracy can develop much further in Iraq and Syria given the many pressures and constraints on its resources and communications. There is some potential for bureaucratic development in IS’s provinces outside of Iraq and Syria, but challenges remain there too. At the moment, then, it would seem that IS bureaucracy is remaining, but not expanding.

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## Notes

[1] Examples include the Jamaat al-Da’wa that proclaimed an Islamic emirate in Kunar, Afghanistan that lasted from 1989 to 1991, the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan that controlled most of the country from 1996 to 2001, and more recently the Caucasus Emirate project and the ‘Emirate of Waqar’ set up by al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula front group Ansar al-Shari’a in Yemen; see Brynjar Lia, “Understanding Jihadi Proto-States,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* (2015), ; and “The ‘Ansar al-Shari’a’ group disposes of the corpse of a man it executed on accusations of betrayal,” *Aden al-Ghad*, February 15, 2012 (<http://adenghad.net/news/7591/%5cgoldmohurhotel.com#.VZAAUPmqkqk>).

[2] Clint Watts, “The U.S. Can’t Destroy ISIS- Only ISIS can Destroy ISIS: The Unfortunate Merits of the ‘Let Them Rot’ Strategy,” *FPRI Blog*, September 2014 (<http://www.fpri.org/geopoliticus/2014/09/us-cant-destroy-isis-only-isis-can-destroy-isis-unfortunate-merits-let-them-rot-strategy>).

[3] E.g. Aaron Zelin, “The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Has a Consumer Protection Office,” *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2014 (<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/the-isis-guide-to-building-an-islamic-state/372769/>).

[4] Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob Shapiro, “Understanding the Daesh economy,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* (2015),

[5] “Announcement of Ministry Formation for the Islamic State of Iraq” *al-Furqan Media*, April 19, 2007 ([https://archive.org/details/The\\_Islamic\\_State\\_of\\_Iraq](https://archive.org/details/The_Islamic_State_of_Iraq)).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/ilam-al-anam.pdf>.

[9] Ibid., e.g. pp. 5-7ff.

[10] Ibid., p. 35.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Cf. Brian Fishman and Douglas Ollivant, “State of Jihad: The Reality of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, May 21, 2014 (<http://warontherocks.com/2014/05/state-of-jihad-the-reality-of-the-islamic-state-in-iraq-and-syria/>). This piece also references the treatise and its acknowledgments of the on-the-ground limitations of ISI as a state at the time.



- [13] Brian Fishman, "Don't BS the American people about Iraq, Syria and ISIL," *War on the Rocks*, August 20, 2014 (<http://warontherocks.com/2014/08/dont-bs-the-american-people-about-iraq-syria-and-isil/>).
- [14] "Second Ministry Formation for the Islamic State of Iraq," *al-Furqan Media*, September 21, 2009 (<https://archive.org/details/Al-Tashkeelah-2-Le-Dwla-Iraq-Islamic>).
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] E.g. Deepa Babington, "Suicide attacks down, extortion up in Iraq's Mosul," *Reuters*, November 27, 2009 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/11/27/idUSGEE5AP1ZF>). Though ISI is not mentioned by name in this report, it is clear ISI is behind the extortion demands.
- [17] "ISI organization names a new leader," *Reuters Arabic*, May 16, 2010 (<http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARACAE64F06S20100516>).
- [18] "The secret everyone knows: pay the Islamic State or be killed," *Niqash*, September 22, 2011 (<http://www.iraqforum.net/vb/5177.html>). Cf. "Mosul businessmen: al-Qa'ida has returned to collect money," *Saut al-Iraq*, October 24, 2011 (<http://www.sotaliraq.com/mobile-news.php?id=29294#axzz3cCEhSC2B>), citing one doctor as saying that 40% of the money from surgical operations is extorted for the sake of "resistance and jihad." More recent declassified ISI documents suggest the complicity of some Sunni political figures in these ISI extortionist enterprises. See Patrick B. Johnston, Benjamin Bahney and Patrick Ryan, "The Enemy You Know and the Ally You Don't," *Foreign Policy*, June 23, 2015 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/23/the-enemy-you-know-and-the-ally-you-dont-arm-sunni-militias-iraq/>).
- [19] Aaron Zelin, "Al-Qaeda Announces an Islamic State in Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 9, 2013 (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-announces-an-islamic-state-in-syria>).
- [20] Rania Abouzeid, "The Jihad Next Door," *Politico*, June 23, 2014 (<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214.html#.VXMEc8-qkko>).
- [21] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Life of Abu Muhammad al-Muhajir: A Founder and Commander of Jamaat Ansar al-Islam in Bilad al-Sham," August 30, 2014 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/2014/08/the-life-of-abu-muhammad-al-muhajir-a-founder>).
- [22] "Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq," U.S. Department of State, December 11, 2012 (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/12/201759.htm>).
- [23] Christoph Reuter, "The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of the Islamic State," *Der Spiegel*, April 18, 2015 (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html>).
- [24] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham Billboards in Raqqa," *Jihadology*, October 22, 2013 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/13960/the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-ash-sham-billboards>).
- [25] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Special report: Northern Storm and the Situation in Azaz," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, January 2015 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/15865/special-report-northern-storm-and-the-situation>).
- [26] Ibid.
- [27] ISIS Statement ('Wilayat Deir az-Zor', before the name change to 'Wilayat al-Kheir'): <http://documents.sy/image.php?id=2458&lang=ar>.
- [28] In Azaz, the Islamic Court was situated in the building that now houses the town's Islamic/Levant Front-affiliated Shari'a Committee. Interestingly, the spokesman for Northern Storm also claimed to this author that ISIS had its own special Islamic court in the same building as its da'wah office prior to the takeover of Azaz.
- [29] Joint statement, November 5, 2013 ([https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BYVBlp0CEARW\\_V.jpg](https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BYVBlp0CEARW_V.jpg)).
- [30] Joint statement (<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BcOtKyECQAyACy.jpg>).
- [31] E.g. "ISIS fighters have seized the flour mills in the town of Manbij in Aleppo province," *El Dorar*, September 5, 2013 (<http://eldorar.com/node/23881>).
- [32] Statement from "Shari'a Committee for al-Bab and its Countryside," October 24, 2013 (<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BXdEMAIIAAaQhj.jpg>).
- [33] "Shari'a Committee in the town of al-Bab in Aleppo announces it does not acknowledge the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham," *Halab News*, October 24, 2013 (<http://halabnews.net/news/40719>).

- [34] “The Revolutionary Military Council in Manbij considers the Islamic State a faction like the rest of the military factions,” *Halab News*, August 26, 2013 (<http://halabnews.net/news/34583>).
- [35] E.g. “The brothers Dawla, Jabhat and Ahrar,” October 2013 <https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/394130767371964417>.
- [36] “ISIL tortured to death Ahrar al-Sham commander in Aleppo,” *Zaman al-Wasl*, January 1, 2014 (<https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/3111.html>).
- [37] Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents, Specimen 1N (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents>).
- [38] Ibid., Specimen P.
- [39] Ibid., Specimen 3G.
- [40] ISIS Statement in Manbij area, February 27, 2014 (<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Bhk0dd1IYAA07eB.jpg>).
- [41] “Abu Luqman...changing the name with changing the mission entrusted to him by ISIS,” Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, April 13, 2014 (<http://www.raqqa-sl.com/en/?p=965>).
- [42] List of hudud punishments from Shari’a judge for al-Bab area, March 2014 (<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BjmwBGZIIAA3GdI.jpg>).
- [43] Jacob Siegel, “Islamic Extremists Now Crucifying People in Syria- and Tweeting Out the Pictures,” *Daily Beast*, April 30, 2014 (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/04/30/islamic-extremists-now-crucifying-people-in-syria-and-tweeting-out-the-pictures.html>).
- [44] “Civil organizations confront ISIS and are subjected to its infringements,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 4, 2013 (<http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12699&article=742257#.VXT6eM-qqko>).
- [45] “After its seizure of the city, the ‘state’ reforms the local council in Raqqa,” *Zaman al-Wasl*, January 16, 2014 (<https://zamanalwsl.net/news/45545.html>).
- [46] ISIS statement, Raqqa city area, April 2014 (<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BIREcahCcaA93Bm.jpg>).
- [47] “Preparation of the public services administration center in the Jarabulus area,” ISIS Wilayat Halab, May 2014 (<https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/468837213980332032>).
- [48] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Aspects of Islamic State Administration in Ninawa Province: Part III,” January 23, 2015 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/15961/aspects-of-islamic-state-is-administration-in>).
- [49] Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents, Specimen X.
- [50] Ibid.
- [51] Ibid., Specimens Z and 4O.
- [52] Ibid. Specimen 1E.
- [53] Ibid. Specimen 4F with explanatory note in the archive.
- [54] E.g. Ibid., Specimen 1J.
- [55] Ibid. Specimen 1M.
- [56] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Aspects of Islamic State Administration in Ninawa Province- Part II,” January 20, 2015 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/15952/aspects-of-islamic-state-is-administration-in>).
- [57] Saleh Elias, “Services improve under IS in Mosul,” *Al-Monitor*, May 13, 2015 (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iraq-isis-mosul-services-sector-improvement-internet-roads.html>).
- [58] Thus most recently, salaries for health workers in Ninawa for the months of February and March 2015 (<http://justpaste.it/salariesmosul>).
- [59] E.g. Diwan al-Ta’alaem in Derna: <https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/574555917481418754>. However, a concerted push by other Derna rebel factions in June dismantled the IS bureaucracy in the city.
- [60] “Da3esh demands teachers in Sirte to repent in the ‘Diwan al-Ta’alaem,’” *Afrigatenews*, June 1, 2015 (<http://www.afrigatenews.net/content/%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D9%8A%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85>).

[61] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State and its 'Sinai' Province," *Tel Aviv Notes*, Moshe Dayan Center, March 26, 2015 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/16345/the-islamic-state-and-its-sinai-province>).

## The Islamic State's Eastern Frontier: Ramadi and Fallujah as Theaters of Sectarian Conflict

by Kirk H. Sowell

### *Abstract*

*The part of eastern Anbar that runs from the provincial capital of Ramadi to the area around Fallujah represents an eastern frontier for the organization that calls itself the Islamic State (IS). The jihadist organization lacks the military capability to fully incorporate these areas into its Syria-based caliphate, but it can use them as a base for launching attacks on government forces in central Iraq, supplementing its limited core forces with local recruits. Key to its ability to do this is the effective exploitation of an environment in which much of the population, though not part of its ideological core, views a military alliance with IS as the only alternative to accepting the rule of Iranian-controlled state institutions and militias. Recent statements from "tribal shaykhs" purporting to represent Anbar's Sunnis have framed support of the Islamic State as essential in defending Sunni lives and identity, and pan-Arab media, while not expressly supportive of IS, has played into its narrative of the conflict in Iraq as a war to defend Sunni Arab identity instead of one waged for a narrow Salafi-Jihadist agenda.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, ISIS, Iraq, sectarianism, tribes, media

### *Introduction*

Eastern Anbar, containing the province's capital, Ramadi, and its second city, Fallujah, form a key sectarian borderland between the Sunni Arab world and Shia Arab Iraq and, beyond it, Shia Persian Iran. While the leadership of the organization that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) is largely Iraqi, its power base is in eastern Syria and the areas of eastern Anbar which it controls are in areas it cannot easily resupply with either men or materiel. It is therefore dependent on the local population and has adapted its public diplomacy in accordance with the need to frame its war effort as being in the defense of Sunnis against an Iranian Shia threat and not an effort to promote a Salafi-Jihadist ideological agenda, including its core element, the implementation of Islamic law.

It is within this context that IS has arranged for groups of local tribal shaykhs (tribal leaders) to gather and give declarations of solidarity in war with IS, near Ramadi, on April 20 and May 30, and once in Fallujah, on June 3. This paper examines the original statements and analyzes how they played out in the Sunni Arab media environment. And since the number of people who watch television channels and other pan-Arab media outlets is many times greater than those who have actually watched these statements on YouTube, it is the dominant narrative in mainstream media, not the original content on YouTube or other social media, which is most important.

This paper's thesis is that the Islamic State's eastern Anbar propaganda efforts have been successful, in part because of IS' own realistic perception of its target audience, but even more because mainstream Arabic-language media have either consciously or subconsciously amplified their message in a way so as to make it credible within the Sunni Arab world. Add to this the sectarian reaction among Shia militia groups to IS' provocations, and we may conclude that IS has both bought itself a substantial degree of positive media coverage and even disrupted the Iraqi government's military operations by redirecting the militias' focus toward non-strategic goals.

*The Islamic State in East Anbar: Narrative & Context*

The fall of the Anbar provincial capital of Ramadi on May 17, 2015, to Islamic State fighters came as a shock to many, but it was the culmination of a long pitched battle. The spark to renewed insurgency in Anbar was the former government's politically-motivated decision in late December 2013 to destroy a prominent Ramadi sit-in site on the pretext that terrorists were present. (Iraq had parliamentary elections in April 2014 and then-Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki used the raid in his campaign, resulting in a large plurality for his coalition. Maliki's reelection was foiled only due to the fall of Mosul in June 2014.) On the insurgent side, the fight began with a mixture of core IS fighters and non-jihadist insurgents belonging to a range of nationalist Islamist and neo-Baathist groups. On the government side, combatants included soldiers from the 8th Army Division, which covers eastern Anbar, federal and provincial police personnel, and "tribal fighters" contributed from pro-government tribes.

Areas in the provincial capital changed hands numerous times, and Ramadi almost fell to IS in April 2015 – which by that point had consolidated dominance over the insurgency – a disaster barely prevented by the intervention of special forces units on April 17-18. While army and police units were weakened by desertions, many had fought for nearly a year and a half with limited support in terms of equipment, ammunition and salaries before collapsing during a three-day surge by IS on May 15-17 which skillfully employed armored truck bombs to shatter security barricades.

By contrast, Anbar's second city Fallujah fell with no visible local resistance. Within a few months of internal maneuvering IS came out on top, vanquishing local rivals. This included such insurgent groups as the Baathist Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiya (JRTN, or Army of the Men of the Naqshbandiya Way), the Islamic Army, and the infamous militant cleric Abdullah al-Janabi. (Al-Janabi had become renowned for his leadership of Fallujah's Mujahidin Shura Council during the war with American forces in 2004, had gone into exile in Syria only to return in early 2014. He briefly led a new Fallujah Military Council, but was ultimately forced to give way to the Islamic State[1]).

What Ramadi and Fallujah have in common is that they are part of what might be called the eastern frontier of IS' caliphate. Despite the impression given by maps which represent IS as controlling vast swaths of land across western Iraq, government forces have always retained control of certain areas, and many areas lack a military presence of any kind. The group lacks any capacity to defend the vast open spaces around Ramadi, which is about 80 kilometers west of Baghdad, with Fallujah about halfway between them. As explained in a recent article in the *CTC Sentinel*, IS' military strategy is based on a kind of "cult of the offensive"[2] – lacking the ability to defend spread-out territory, it is constantly launching offensives to keep government forces off-balance combined with tactical retreats whenever faced by counteroffensives. In eastern Anbar, it fought for part of 2014 in Abu Ghraib (between Fallujah and Baghdad), and the subdistrict of Ameriyat al-Fallujah (south of Fallujah proper). Both of those it ultimately lost. Along with other insurgents IS has held out in Karma, a district adjacent to Fallujah and to its northeast. Precisely because of a long battle that included Shia militias on the government side, Karma has taken on a strategic importance out of proportion to its size, and will play a role in the discussion below of IS' propaganda efforts in the theatre.

The information environment among Sunni residents is an important factor in the success of insurgents generally and the Islamic State in particular. As in other countries, what most people know about public affairs is defined by a combination of things they hear word-of-mouth from their community and what they see on television news programs. What makes Iraq different from most Arab countries is the high diversity of news sources and the corresponding fragmentation by demographic group. While no TV channel openly



supports IS, a range of channels support an insurgent narrative focused on the government's ties to Iran and sponsorship of Shia militias which kill, kidnap, torture and cleanse Sunnis in areas they wish to control.

An important barometer of this media environment is the *Baghdad* television channel, which is controlled by the Islamic Party, which is part of Vice-President Osama al-Nujayfi's Muttahidun bloc and a central actor in the political process. *Baghdad* reacted to the new insurgency in January 2014 by referring to insurgents as "revolutionaries," using the term whether the fighters in question were IS' global jihadists or national groups focused on Iraq. It continued to do this even after Islamic Party leader Salim al-Jiburi was elected speaker of parliament on July 14 of last year. But then once IS attacked the Kurds, with whom Muttahidun is aligned, it began referring to its fighters as "gunmen" (*musallahin*) instead of "revolutionaries" (*thuwar*). Then after the government was formed in September, all insurgents became "gunmen" (they were almost all IS by this point anyway). But by May 2015, when Ramadi fell, *Baghdad* was again running interviews with figures who equated Shia militias with IS or even suggested that the militias were worse than the jihadists.

Regionally, the Qatar-based *al-Jazeera* plays a similar legitimizing role. While not expressly pro-IS, *al-Jazeera* gives IS largely neutral coverage while covering the government as hostile and playing up militia crimes. Its role is addressed below.

The practical importance of this is that it creates a substantial segment of the population which does not hold to IS' core ideology but believes that working with it against the government makes sense, or that at least accepting it is no worse than the government. The pan-Arab newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi*, which has a negative line on the Iraqi government, has quoted local residents of expressing relief at IS' takeover. Not being IS core supporters themselves, at least some nonetheless feel persecuted under the government and relatively safe under the rule of the Islamic State.[3] And now that the army's failure to defend Ramadi has led to the Shia militias taking the lead in many Anbar operations, the narrative should become stronger still.

### ***The Islamic State and the "Shaykhs" of Ramadi***

Along with its final push to take the Anbar capital, the Islamic State has also recently arranged for two "conferences" of men endorsing it while claiming to be "tribal shaykhs" who represent Anbar. The first supposed pro-IS tribal conference, a "Proclamation of the First Conference of the Tribes of Anbar," published on April 20, emphasized the Islamic State as a defender of the people of Anbar. Only one unidentified man spoke, with others standing behind him. The word for Islamic law (*sharia*) did not occur; the closest to a statement of religious ideology was the claim that IS "only came to show the truth, and relieve the people of Anbar of oppression, and Sunnis in general..." The statement emphasized that there was no difference between the state's army and Iran-backed Shia militias, and that the crimes they committed in Diyala and Salah al-Din were coming to Anbar.[4] But Ramadi did not fall in April, and the statement received no substantial attention either inside or outside of Iraq.

On May 30, two weeks after Ramadi had fallen, IS put on a second tribal conference, "The Tribes of Anbar Hold Their Second Conference Under the Title, 'One Ship,' on the Ground of Victorious Ramadi." The video began showing the banner, which they appear to have put some time in designing, then gave a slow camera review of the faces of those attending. This was followed by a speech in front of the assembled "shaykhs" by the same unidentified speaker. The language was heavily Islamic, but again there was again no reference to Islamic law, but rather a focus simply on war, praise for IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and "the heroic soldiers of the caliphate." The speaker also called on Ramadi residents who had fled to Baghdad to return.[5]

More effort appears to have been put into this second presentation, but aside from the better production value and Ramadi's fall, there was no additional content to justify a second "conference." (Neither video actually gave audio of the shaykhs engaging in discussion, just some men sitting around and talking casually, with none of it intelligible.) Many of the unidentified "shaykhs" on close-up appeared sullen, with some consciously covering their faces when the camera approached. At the end there was a joint "Allahu Akbar" (God is Greatest) chant, repeated multiple times, but it was weak and some standing there did not participate in the chant.

What made this second Ramadi "conference" a major event was that *al-Jazeera* chose to make it the subject of their "Behind the News" program that evening with the provocative title, "Why Did the Tribal Shaykhs of Ramadi Give Bay'a to the State Organization?"[6] (*Bay'a* refers to an Islamic loyalty oath; *tandhim al-dawla* or "the Organization of the State" is how *al-Jazeera* routinely refers to IS.) The program chose one Abd al-Qadir al-Nayel as the representative of Anbari Sunnis, setting him against a Shia parliamentarian from the Shia Islamist State of Law Coalition, Muhammad al-Akayli. Nayel did not defend IS directly, in fact he said "these men did not give bay'a, but rather declared they were in one ship together in facing the Iranian threat." Unlike the speaker at the event, Nayel is a recognizable figure, having taken visible part in the 2013 protest movement,[7] often appearing on such mainstream media outlets as *BBC Arabic* to speak for Anbari Sunnis. [8] And since Akayli's coalition is that of former prime minister Nuri al-Maliki, whose very name is toxic among Sunnis in Iraq and regionally, the mere choice of guests – instead of setting a Sunni opponent of IS against Nayel – make the program slant toward IS.

Furthermore, *al-Jazeera's* framing of the issue was precisely, and unnecessarily, in IS' favor – stating as a fact that these men were "tribal shaykhs" of Ramadi who have given bay'a to IS. And indeed Nayel had a point – the word "bay'a" did not appear in either of these statements, though they clearly declared military solidarity with it. So when Nayel argued that these men represented local tribes who were joining with IS against an "Iranian-controlled government" after having attempted change through peaceful protest, this credibility provided a degree of legitimacy.

Whether these men actually were tribal leaders is also a matter of factual dispute in Iraq. The Iraqi television channel *al-Dijla* had a debate on the issue on June 7, but it placed a prominent member of the Anbari al-Bu Nimr tribe, Naim al-Kaud, against another Anbari shaykh, Raad Sulayman. Kaud condemned IS unequivocally, and asserted that the men who appeared in the IS videos did not include any notable tribal leaders. Sulayman was ambiguous and focused more on criticizing the Iraqi government and Iran, but he refused to endorse the pro-IS statements. And *al-Dijla* chose a headline that avoided presuming tribes in general endorsed IS: "Who Gave Baya to Daesh Among Anbar Tribes?"[9] A news consumer casually following the issue in pan-Arab media quite reasonably might assume all of Anbar's tribes had endorsed IS.

Other prominent Sunnis, from Anbar and elsewhere in Iraq, condemned the events. Iraq's Fiqh Commission, a self-governing body which has semi-official status, condemned the statements (including the one in Fallujah discussed below) on June 6, saying they had taken place under threat of violence and were therefore invalid, calling IS a "terrorist organization" organizing these events for "war propaganda." [10] Similarly, the pan-Arab *al-Arab al-Jadid* quoted Shaykh Taha al-Abud, representing the General Council of Anbar Tribes, saying, "a number of leaders who appeared in the recording have called us and told us that death stood behind the cameras," arguing that bay'a given under duress had no religious validity.[11] But Abud is just one of the individuals who has been quoted in the media as representing the Anbar tribal council over the past year, and those inclined against the government might not find this persuasive.

Along the same lines, government-aligned Ramadi tribal leaders held a press conference with the chairman of the provincial council, Sabah Karhut al-Halbusi, on June 7.[12] The event was held in Khalidiya, a town between Ramadi and Fallujah to which Iraqi forces have regrouped, and the statement was read by Rafia al-Fahdawi, of the Al-Bu Fahd, a prominent tribe in Ramadi. The statement declared that the individuals who “gave bay‘a” – again it is notable there was a perception of bay‘a even though the Ramadi statements did not use the term – did not include the leader of any tribe and did not represent Anbar. But the statement also included a reference to “the blessed Hashd al-Shaabi,” praising the Shia militia-dominated umbrella group, a statement with which many Anbaris would not agree.

### ***Fallujah and Karma: Eastern Outposts of the Islamic State***

The eastern edge of Anbar has a special sensitivity because of its proximity to Baghdad, while Fallujah and the adjacent district, Karma, are central because they are the two areas in which the Islamic State controls territory or has continually contested territory with government forces since January 2014. Thus the June 3 statement from a purported “Tribal Council” supporting the Islamic State drew attention across the region. And the template seems to have been taken from Ramadi, as the pan-Arab *al-Quds al-Arabi* and the Emirati newspaper *al-Khaleej* had similar headlines: “Tribal Council in Anbar Gives Baya to the Islamic State Organization,”[13] and “Council of Tribal Shaykhs of the Two Districts of Fallujah and Karma Give Baya to the State Organization.”[14]

While the Fallujah statement has much in common with the Ramadi statement, it was different in some ways, and the events in Fallujah deserve special attention because IS’ successful play on sectarian passions in Fallujah has had an impact on the Iraqi government’s military operations and the country’s fragile body politic.

Following is the full statement of this Fallujah “council” (minus boilerplate religious language at the beginning). IS gave the video the title, “The Tribes of Fallujah are a Fork in the Eyes of the Enemies”:

*Many vain attempts have been made to give legitimacy to the war of the Safavid-Crusader Alliance on Sunnis and their territories, recruiting hundreds of satellite television channels and other media, and that which is propagated by a group of treasonous Muslim scholars, who claim to represent Sunnis, through what is referred to as the parliament and the provincial councils, yet now the matter has become clear and the truth has appeared, like the sun in the light of day. For this is simply an army of sectarian militias, who have occupied Ameriya, Khaladiya, Haditha and Nukhayb [all Anbar districts with a Shia militia presence]. These are assisted by what are referred to as tribal fighters, agents of the enemy used to expel the original residents of these areas and humiliate them, and to bring about demographic change among the local population in certain areas, attaching Nukhayb and a large part of Ameriya to other provinces.*

*And we call upon Sunni peoples in the Arabian peninsula, to be alert to the plans of Safavid Iran to encircle you from the south by the Houthis in Yemen, and also occupy those areas adjacent to you in Anbar [a reference to Nukhayb], and from the north by Hizbillat [derogatory term for Hizbullah), and the the treasonous Ghadir Corps [the Badr Organization] and Asaib Ahl al-Batil [Asaib Ahl al-Haq], and the Khorasan Brigades which is controlled by the Bloodletting Wali [satirical reference to Iran’s Supreme Leader]. These militias are supported by America, and kill, kidnap and rape Sunnis, taking their homes based upon the claim that they are terrorists, and bomb Sunni Arabs from land and waters with military bases in Arab territories with the participation of your rulers in the Arab Gulf, and so awaken O Sunni people, for this is a conspiracy against the followers of the Prophet*

*Muhammad, wherever they are.*

*The council of tribal shaykhs of Fallujah and Karma aim to clarify to Sunnis in Mesopotamia and the Arabian peninsula, you who have had your lands taken and your blood shed, along with the humiliation of the people of Anbar who are displaced. The greatest example is those trapped on the Zaybiz Bridge [crossing from Anbar into Baghdad], where Iranian henchmen violate Sunni honor, humiliating our mothers and our children. Anbaris cannot even enter Baghdad without someone to pledge for them. Furthermore they engage in daily shelling of women and children in Fallujah, destroying houses, mosques and schools.*

*From this pulpit we therefore declare, our solidarity and firm stand with the Islamic State, state of the caliphate, and with the Commander of the Faithful and Caliph of Muslims, Shaykh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, may God preserve him. And we declare to him that we stand with you, to fight the enemies of religion and the community of believers, among infidels, apostates and hateful rafidites [derogatory term for Shia]. The council of the shaykhs and notables of Fallujah and Karma, June 3, 2015 [also gave the Islamic date]. And peace be upon you, the blessings and mercies of God. Allahu Akbar![15]*

Two points are notable regarding this statement. The first is the prevalence of sectarian rhetoric over standard Salafi-Jihadist ideology. The statement includes no reference to the word “bay‘a,” despite much Arabic-language media reporting to the contrary. The word “shari‘a,” or Islamic law, does not appear, just as it was absent in the Ramadi statements, nor any reference to the implementation of any Islamic civil or criminal provisions, measures for which IS is most known globally. Instead it is a statement of sectarian warfare, making use of inflammatory references to the demographic cleansing of Sunnis by Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias. Only near the end of the statement does this “tribal council” give something like an endorsement to IS’ religious ideology, referring to IS’ caliphate and Baghdadi as caliph and “Commander-of-the-Faithful.”

A second key feature of the statement is its regional paradigm. There are two frames of reference, Iraq itself and the Persian Gulf, although neither term is used. Early on the term “Safavid-Crusader” plays on the belief, widely held in the Sunni Arab world, that since 2003 there has been a secret alliance between the United States and Iran to remove Sunnis from power in Iraq and break up the country. Instead of Iraq the country is referred to as “Mesopotamia,” a term used for the country by IS since the founding of its predecessor entity of “Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia” by Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi in 2003.

And then the focus shifts to the Persian Gulf, which is first twice referred to as the “Arabian Peninsula” and once as “the Arab Gulf.” The statement brings in Hizbullah in the north, and the Yemeni Houthis from the south, and also references Iraqi militias.

Notably, the statement emphasizes Nukhayb, an area of significant local interest which means nothing to the broader world of Salafi-Jihadism, and then calls this to the attention of Gulf Arabs, claiming the Shia are trying to take it. Nukhayb is a district in southern Anbar that borders Karbala and runs southwest toward Saudi Arabia. Nukhayb was part of districts making up what is now Anbar during the 20th century, except for a one-year period from 1978-1979 when it was temporarily joined to Karbala.[16] It is routinely used by Karbala residents – Shia – to travel on pilgrimage, and there have been attacks on Shia in the district in the past. In May, Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi expanded the security responsibility of the army’s Central Euphrates Command, which covers Karbala and other nearby provinces that are Shia, to include Nukhayb, and Shia militias have taken up residence there. This is the basis for the fear of a Shia takeover.

Yet as with Ramadi, what the “shaykhs” statement actually said is less important than the message conveyed to the Sunni Arab public, both inside Iraq and regionally, and the message was that local tribal leaders had



given bay'a to IS. One report, published on June 4 in the widely-read pan-Arab daily *al-Quds al-Arabi* among other outlets, was entitled, "Tribal Council in Anbar, Iraq Declares Baya to the Islamic State Organization." This report even contained a verbatim quote which overlapped but also substantially deviated from the actual statement given the previous day. This statement, identifying the speaker as one Ahmad Dara al-Jumayli, declared that the council "met and decided to give bay'a to the Islamic State organization and also give bay'a to its emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, we hear and obey...The people of Karma have been fighting government forces under the names of a number of groups, including the Jaysh al-Mujahidin, Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia [JRTN or Army of the Men of the Naqshbania Way]" and the Army of the Tribal Revolutionaries and the Military Councils, but they are today united under the banner of the Islamic State organization." [17]

*Al-Quds al-Arabi* attributed this quote to Turkey's *Anadolu Agency*, which has an Arabic version that is often used as an information source in the region. [18] In between the opening and the ending quoted above, neither of which appeared in the actual statement, much of the content overlapped, including the attacks on Iran and Shia generally and the Houthis, tying the war in Yemen to a regional plot against Sunnis. But what it left out was crucial – Iraqi Sunni-specific concerns about cleansing in Nukhayb (which were not mentioned) and elsewhere, as well as the criticism of the Arab gulf states as "your rulers" and their ties to American military operations. The list of names of insurgent groups joining the IS coalition is also not in the video. The statement starts off by saying that it derives from a "video statement of the tribal council" on June 3, so it clearly references the same event, but it appears that IS was sending out a version which has a stronger endorsement. It is also possible that *Anadolu Agency* removed the offensive passages.

Again *al-Jazeera* framed the Fallujah statement in a way quite favorable to IS: "Tribal Shaykhs of Fallujah Give Baya to Baghdadi and Attack the Government," [19] and their internet article simply repeated what the "shaykhs of Fallujah" reportedly said, although it is not clear where they got their text as the quotes match neither the actual video released by IS nor the *Anadolu* version reported by *al-Quds al-Arabi* and others. The *al-Jazeera* article stated in part:

*Local leaders and tribal shaykhs of Fallujah have declared that they are standing in solidarity with the Islamic State organization and giving bay'a to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the organization's leader, harshly criticizing Sunni representatives in the Iraqi government and parliament because of their stance supporting what they referred to as the sectarian attacks of the government of Hayder Abadi and its militias in Sunni areas.*

The full video of the statement appears not to have been available until June 7, [20] so *al-Jazeera* and many other outlets used a picture from the Ramadi event on April 30 as well as a short clip showing part of the Fallujah statement without audio. [21] The Saudi owned *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, by contrast, reported the Fallujah statement in a way less favorable to IS, referring to the shaykhs as "the council of *what is referred to as* [emphasis added] the shaykhs of the tribes of Fallujah and Karma," who "declared their loyalty to the Daesh organization [using the pejorative Arabic acronym for IS) and gave bay'a to its leader." [22]

Even media outlets hostile to IS used the *al-Jazeera* headline. The Syrian opposition *Orient News* television channel, which is pro-rebel but generally critical of the Islamic State, entitled its report on the event, "Sunnis Tribes in Fallujah, Anbar Give Bay'a to the Islamic State." [23] After playing a clip, the narrator commented, "All current indications suggest that the Iraqi government has abandoned Anbar and Sunnis in general... the government of Hayder al-Abadi, which was to clean up the corruption left by Maliki, has given Sunnis nothing but oppression, refusing to arm the tribes in Anbar or grant an autonomous region, having violently suppressed protests before the organization (IS) appeared in the first place, unleashing militias supported



by Iran.” The report was clearly put together in haste – not only did it use video from the April 30 Ramadi statement, along the bottom of the screen it identified the Ramadi speaker as Ibrahim Abu Za’yan, who when mentioned at all is uniformly referred to in Iraqi sources as the reader of the statement in Fallujah.

Similarly, *BBC Arabic* also used the headline on June 5, “Why Did the ‘Tribes of Karma and Fallujah’ Give Bay’a to the Islamic State Organization?” But the BBC, in addition to putting quotes around the reference to “tribes,” had two guests who were Sunni – Yahya al-Kubaysi of the Iraqi Institute for Strategic Studies, and Anbar Councilman Tahir Abd al-Ghani. Both stated that these men represented only a portion of opinion in Anbar, and Kubaysi, who is a strong critic of the Iraqi government, is the only prominent commentator who noted that the statement was purely political and contained no “doctrinal” endorsement of the Islamic State as such. The BBC appears to have created its program based on the *Anadolu* version, since the journalist used the phrase “we hear and obey” in quoting the Fallujah shaykhs, and this phrase appears solely in the *Anadolu* version and not in the actual statement.

Indeed it is hardly clear how representative this “Council of Tribal Shaykhs” is of the local population. Unlike in Ramadi, many sources identify the Fallujah spokesman by name, which appears consistently as “Ibrahim Rashid Abu Za’yan.”[24] Yet there is not a single Iraqi news report or other internet reference to him prior to this statement, and no evidence that Za’yan is a prominent local leader.

The name put forward in the version originating with *Anadolu*, Ahmad Dara al-Jumayli, is likewise not that of a well-known Anbari tribal leader. An Arabic search for his name does not bring him up as a prominent individual in the area. A review of videos posted from Karma claiming to represent tribal leaders does turn up one showing a man resembling him reading a statement endorsing the Islamic State in October 2014. Other videos posted of individuals claiming to be Karma tribal leaders over the past year and a half show no consistent group, nor a consistent message. Some stress the humanitarian angle, calling on the government to lift its blockade of the city, while others are pro-insurgent without being pro-IS, and there is the previous one endorsing IS.[25]

IS’ most recent direct publication, a statement from spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released on June 19, followed the same line, emphasizing the sectarian conflict and the cleansing of Sunnis by Shia militias in areas around Baghdad, as well as the original purpose of the American invasion as having been to remove Sunnis from power. Like the June 3 shaykhs statement, Adnani’s message was unusually heavy on Iraq-specific details related to alleged Shia militia crimes, and light on Salafist themes.[26] The difference in terms of public impact is that this statement was likely listened to only by IS’ core audience, and was not broadcast across national and regional media as speaking for Sunnis in Iraq.

### ***Fallujah and Karma: Center Stage of Sectarian Conflict***

The Islamic State has certainly succeeded in making Fallujah and Karma a kind of “forward front” for sectarian conflict. Fallujah has a long history of Sunni Islamist militancy, and its role in the fight against U.S. forces in Iraq, especially in 2004, is well known. Karma is a mid-sized town which has significance out of proportion to its size in part because of its proximity to Baghdad, but also because, unlike Fallujah, it has remained contested between insurgents and government-aligned forces. The government’s lack of adequate regular forces has led to dependence on Shia militias, a factor which plays well into IS’ propaganda narrative. The Iran-backed militia Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH) has been active there since last summer,[27] and more recently, the Badr Organization has highlighted its role in fighting there.[28]

The June 3 statement was just part of IS' effort to use Fallujah as a theatre stage for sectarian polarization. On May 26, it had paraded through the streets of Fallujah a captured Iraqi soldier of Shia background, Mustapha al-Athari of Sadr City in Baghdad, and then killed him by hanging him from a bridge. They then released photos of residents cheering on the spectacle, as well as of the dead body.[29] It is hard to imagine anything more inflammatory, and the event reverberated strongly in Shia Iraq,[30] receiving attention from a wide range of media and establishment Shia politicians. Militias also responded directly; AAH promised to avenge Athari and condemned what it alleged to be the government "ignoring" soldiers in danger.[31] Kathim al-Jabiri, leader of the Ashura Companies, a key militia of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), likewise promised revenge, saying that Athari was a "model of sacrifice... we will not rest until we have avenged you." [32] During the June 3 statement, on video an executioner led an Iraqi soldier before the shaykhs and had him kneel in front of them while the statement was read aloud, and the video ended just after he had been shot in the back of the head, showing his bloodied corpse crouched over on the pavement. The soldier was a Sunni Kurd who was serving in the Iraqi army rather than a Shia Arab, but it was inflammatory nonetheless.

Al-Jazeera's "Behind the News" June 5 program addressed Fallujah and military operations in the area.[33] To discuss this sensitive topic, the program again invited Anbari activist Abd al-Qadir al-Nayel, and again set him against a Shia protagonist, this time Karim Nuri, a senior figure in the Badr Organization who is also a spokesman for the Hashd militia organization. Nayel again avoided defending IS' Salafi-Jihadist agenda, but instead began by discussing the historical role of Fallujah in resisting Iran going back to Babylonian times, before Islam, and framed the war in pure sectarian terms as an effort to "liquidate" Sunnis. He did at one point mention in passing that IS had human intelligence sources which had penetrated the security services, suggesting that he was in contact with them either directly or indirectly. (Nuri interjected at this point, asking, "Are you a spokesman for Daesh?") The program did not deal directly with the June 3 statement, even though it was widely reported, including by al-Jazeera.

Shia militia leaders reacted in the inflammatory fashion which IS presumably intended. Qays al-Khazali, AAH leader, on June 3 called on the government to give his fighters "immunity" before they entered Fallujah, saying of IS, "we will get to you even if you are in cities or provinces that are fortified." [34] Qasim al-Araji, the leader of Badr's parliamentary bloc who is often seen in the field wearing fatigues, called for the city's destruction. In a reported statement on his Facebook page (apparently deleted later), Araji called for Fallujah to be destroyed – "Fallujah is the head of the snake, and the solution is to level it." And Sunni politicians called for Araji and Khazali to be prosecuted for advocating war crimes.[35]

And about this time, Shia militia leaders began to change their minds about the strategic priority in Anbar and decided to turn back from Ramadi to Fallujah. On June 10, Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri, who was the de facto "field commander" for Anbar operations at that point, declared that the operation to liberate Ramadi was "frozen" to allow citizens to leave the city. Within a few days it became clear that Ameri had changed his mind completely, and now was focused on Fallujah. Speaking to reporters, Ameri now declared that "liberating Fallujah will allow us to enter Ramadi without a fight." [36]

There was no strategic logic to this turn in thinking – Fallujah is farther away from IS' center of strength than Ramadi, and at no point has IS been shown to have large military forces there. But the practical result of this was that militia forces pulled back, leaving depleted army and police units to face Ramadi, which they were in no condition to do. While the dynamics of Iraqi security policy are beyond the scope of this paper, it is relevant to note the extent to which this created further confusion within the already ill-organized military efforts of government-aligned forces in Anbar. Throughout late June and early July the militias increasingly focused their efforts on Fallujah and Karma, forcing the government to go along even though the prime

minister never formally adopted Ameri's new "Fallujah First" strategy. Thus IS forces, vastly outnumbered and relying on local recruits, have thus been able to draw out the conflict in eastern Anbar as Baghdad-aligned forces each fight their own war.

### ***Conclusion: IS' Dependence on Sectarian Polarization***

The Islamic State has found success in framing its war in eastern Anbar as being for the sake of a much broader public interest than would normally be the case for an organization mainly known both regionally and globally for strict Islamic punishments and the execution of prisoners of war and even civilians. Carefully framing its fight as one with that of Sunnis who are not part of its ideological core but share its strongly anti-Shia views, IS' public diplomacy has gotten a large boost from mainstream television and online Arabic-language media. While a close examination of the three statements of "tribal leaders" suggests that IS has at most only the support of some elements of Anbari tribes, those whose information environment is the mainstream media—i.e., the bulk of the Arabic-speaking public—could quite reasonably conclude that a broad cross-section of Anbari tribal leaders have endorsed the organization.

Furthermore, while the Islamic State plainly has a certain degree of support among Anbar's population (without which it would not be able to maintain a war standing), it is equally clear that such support as IS does genuinely have is based upon political and sectarian considerations and not ideological support for IS' version of the Salafi-Jihadist worldview. Yet again even relatively well-read people in the region can easily conclude from the mainstream coverage of these events that Anbari tribal leaders have given an oath of religious loyalty (bay'a) to IS and its vision of a restored Islamic caliphate. Mainstream Arab media—albeit in some cases unwittingly—plays a major role in the ability of the Islamic State to propagandize itself in a time of war.

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## Understanding the Daesh Economy

by Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob N. Shapiro

### *Abstract*

*Beliefs about the long-run economic prospects of Daesh, often known as the Islamic State or ISIL, inform international decisions over how to counteract the group. We analyze Daesh as an economic entity, demonstrating first that the amount of productive activity in areas it controls is small and second that its institutions are inimical to sustained growth. Unless one believes that the group's ideology will enable it to manage an extractive autocratic economy with historically unprecedented efficiency, then its long-run prospects are poor. This observation has a number of policy implications at both operational and strategic levels.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, ISIS, financing, economics, rebel governance

### *Introduction*

Decisions over how to combat Daesh, often known as the Islamic State or ISIL, must hinge to some extent on beliefs about its long run prospects and ability to continue its military expansion. If the group cannot afford to wage a war for greater territorial control because its economic model is unsustainable, then containment could be the most appropriate policy.[1] If, however, the group is likely to accumulate enough resources to continue expanding, then active countermeasures such as sustained and forceful military action may be warranted.

Unfortunately, existing literature on the group is not helpful in adjudicating its long-run prospects because the literature has focused primarily on what is exceptional about Daesh. Scholars and journalists have written about a range of characteristics including the group's extreme brutality[2], steady flow of foreign fighters[3], unusually slick propaganda machine[4], apocalyptic ideology[5], and diverse funding sources. [6] Excellent work has also documented how Daesh grew out of the previous Islamic State of Iraq which went underground in Iraq from 2009-12 and re-emerged in 2013 in Iraq through a systematic campaign of assassination and subterfuge.[7] While understandable, this focus on the group's unusual tactical proficiency and extreme brutality are not necessarily germane for assessing its long-run outlook.

Instead, if we consider seriously Daesh's claimed aspirations, then we have to ask about its economic potential as a state. As of April 2015, the group maintained dominant authority in an area of roughly 138,000 square kilometers that contained a pre-war population of eight million people.[8] Within this region the group regulates the economy, taxes civilians, and maintains an army. It functions, in other words, as a state. If we examine it as such vis-à-vis other developing countries, we can place Daesh in context and generate reasonable expectations about its military potential.

In doing so, we make three contributions. First, we assess the value of the economy it controls using two objective and replicable methods. Both show that the pre-war economic activity in areas Daesh now controls was modest at best. Second, we draw on a rich literature in development economics to ask how effective we would expect Daesh to be at maintaining that economic activity and translating it into military power if we ignored the specifics of their ideology.[9] The final takeaway of this analysis is that the group's prospects are quite poor; given they are an extractive state with exclusionary institutions, they must sell resources at a steep discount and buy weapons without access to state-to-state markets.[10] Third, we explore what Daesh's limited economic capacity implies for countermeasures against it. We argue that it is unlikely Daesh will

garner the revenue required to wage symmetric conflict or even to defend against a sustained conventional assault and that its poor economy will lead to political instability if it is contained within current boundaries. While the group can clearly maintain an asymmetric insurgency over limited territory, its ability to do more is inherently limited.

The bottom line of our analysis is that provided the principles of economics apply equally to an autocratic, extractive state under violent leadership as they do to any other state, the economic outlook for Daesh is poor.[11] And the initial returns on Daesh's economic management are not good. Press reports cite serious inflation, scarcity of key supplies, and failing public services.[12] These are exactly what we would expect based on other countries' experiences, and they do not bode well for the group's long-term survival.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 outlines Daesh's economic resources, first examining existing evidence on how the group has been raising funds and then estimating the total volume of economic activity it could draw on. We take two approaches to estimating economic activity in areas Daesh controls: gross cell product based on GEcon data and luminosity based on DMSP-OLS data. We find that Daesh's economy is at best comparable to other small low-income states. Section 2 draws comparisons and lessons from growth economics and historical examples, showing that the current institutional environment is not compatible with known drivers of economic sustainability. Section 3 outlines the viability of the group for an array of scenarios and concludes with policy recommendations.

### *Daesh economic resources*

This section first describes existing evidence on Daesh revenue sources. It then presents replicable macro-level upper bounds on the pre-war economic potential of the area the group controls. Both approaches underscore the dearth of sustainable enterprise in the territory.

#### *Daesh economic resources: existing evidence*

Daesh collects finances from an array of informal activity. Broadly, its revenue is composed of extraction from fixed resource endowments on the territory it controls, kidnap for ransom, and taxes and extortion. While Daesh may benefit from external financial donations, we do not outline them in detail as they are thought to be modest.[13] Comprehensive presentations of Daesh financial resources are in reports from FATF[14] and Levitt.[15]

#### Extraction of endowments

Control of oil and gas reserves presents a potentially sizable income stream for Daesh. As of March 2015, its area of control included several major oil fields in Iraq and Syria, including al-Omar, Jafra, and Jeribe in Syria and Ajil in Iraq.[16] Reports have placed overall estimates of the group's overall oil potential as high as 80,000 barrels per day for anywhere from three to eight million USD per day in income.[17]

These indications of oil wealth are misleading. First, most widely-circulated production estimates are based on pre-war levels and Daesh struggles to maintain command of the infrastructure and personnel necessary to efficiently produce and process oil. While Daesh provides protection to technical staff of oil operations who keep working[18] and anecdotally offers high salaries to experts willing to work on its territory, its prospects for long-run productivity are poor. The group needs spare parts for equipment[19] as well as skilled technicians to properly perform injections on the fields[20], which are necessary to maintain productivity.

Both resources are hard to obtain within their territory. Moreover, the oil production and transportation infrastructure is vulnerable to destruction from air strikes and drone attacks.[21] Consequentially, they are able to produce oil at only a fraction of typical output.[22] Second, Daesh lacks access to formal markets for sale of processed oil. They smuggle a portion of their output to Turkey, Kurdistan, and Jordan for sale at steep discounts, reported to be anywhere from 20-100 USD per barrel[23], and a large share of the profits on those discounted sales likely go to intermediaries unaffiliated with the group.[24] Internal markets are the primary outlet for Daesh oil, where it is used as a cheap source of energy for Daesh vehicles and civilians. Overall, lack of access to conventional oil production and marketing opportunities will prevent Daesh from earning substantial oil revenue over the long-run.

Figure 1 highlights how poorly Daesh is doing in terms of maintaining and managing its oil resources.[25] Efficient oil production typically requires flaring methane gas that comes up with the oil and thus active oil wells leave a clear signature in night-time imagery. Using data from NOAA on daily flaring activity in Syria and Iraq combined with estimates of Daesh control, we calculated a range of indicators of oil production. Each column of the figure shows a different measure of production: the number of sites flaring on any given day, the average intensity of flaring activity over all sites, which captures total production, and the average intensity of flaring at active sites, which captures the intensity of production among working sites. The top row of the figure shows the raw figures and the bottom row normalizes by activity before the war escalated, March-June 2012, to highlight changes over time more starkly. As anticipated, Daesh's productive base was small to start with and dropped rapidly (column 1), its total productivity has generally fallen since January 2014 (column 2), and the productivity per well is quite poor compared to that in non-Daesh areas of Iraq and Syria.

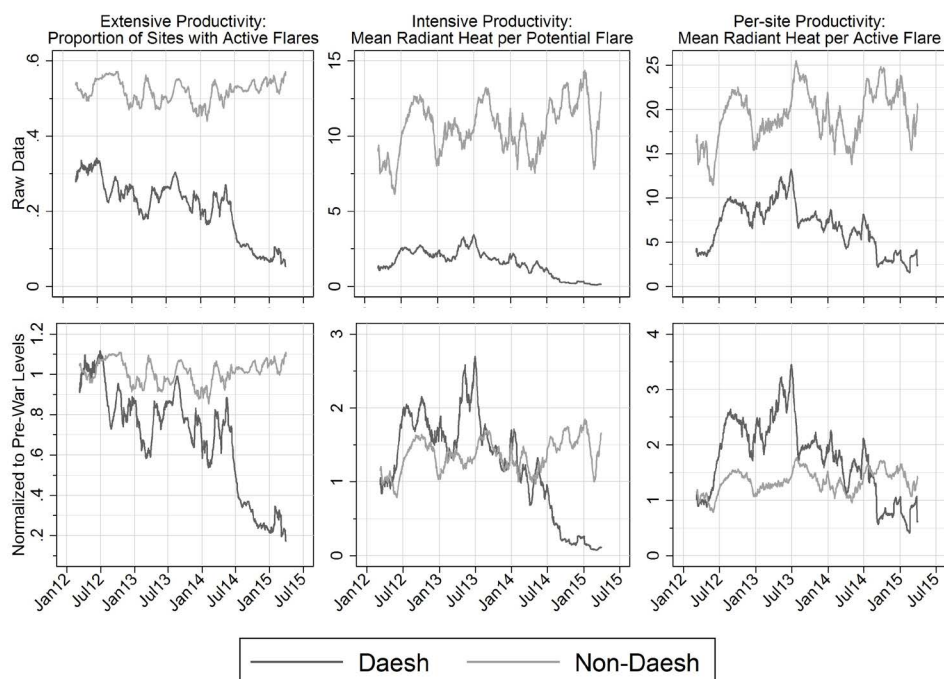


Figure 1: Oil Productivity in Daesh Areas

After illicit oil sales, another large revenue source is the excavation and sale of cultural artifacts. While Daesh has destroyed many sites for publicity, it also excavates them professionally and smuggles the objects for sale near the border with Turkey. It is very difficult to estimate how much revenue this generates. One object representative of what Daesh might excavate sold for fifty million USD in 2007. Nevertheless, as with oil,

lack of access to formal markets prevents the sale of these objects at their full potential, and second hand smugglers reap a portion of the sale revenue.[26] Moreover, for trade in goods generally, the economy is almost surely beset with rent-seeking by those who can manage trade—e.g., tribal leaders with pre-existing connections across territorial borders who likely capture most of the profit from smuggling.

### Ransom

The most widely reported enterprise for Daesh is kidnapping for ransom. Income from ransoms is variable, but has been estimated at about \$20 million USD in 2014.[27] Similarly, they are involved in human trafficking of women and children. While payments for kidnappings might be substantial, human trafficking appears to be used for payment in kind to soldiers and does not provide large revenue.[28] There is limited evidence of Daesh running other types of business for profit. Daesh reportedly operates wheat silos in Iraq, and smuggles wheat and limited agricultural products[29], but these activities are not cited as being particularly lucrative.

### Taxation and extortion

Asset seizures and extortion also generate revenue for Daesh. According to the excellent report from FATF[30], Daesh imposes a broad range of revenue-generating fees including: fuel and vehicle taxes, school fees for children, cash withdrawal taxes at banks (cited as 5% in one source), forced “donations” by businesses, crop confiscation, seizure and leasing of agricultural machinery, transit duties on smugglers crossing its territory (often to trade looted antiquities), and customs duties on trucks entering Iraq through border crossings in areas it controls. The first three revenue streams amount to regressive consumption taxes which are generally thought to reduce incentives for work and savings *a priori*.[31] The others appear to be inconsistently imposed across Daesh territory based on press reports. Such ad hoc business taxes create uncertainty around the regulatory environment which has been cited in less conflictual settings as a major barrier to firm growth.[32]

Perhaps the largest source of Daesh tax revenues comes indirectly from the Iraqi and Syrian governments. Both governments continue to pay salaries to employees living in Daesh controlled areas.[33] These employees typically need to pay a tax when they withdraw cash or when they return home from collecting cash salaries in government controlled areas.[34] Such unpredictable income taxes reduce civilians’ incentives to spend cash as well as their motivation to use banking institutions as they have low confidence in how they will access their accounts in the future.

### Human capital

The steady flow of foreign fighters in theory provides ample labor supply for Daesh to conduct state enterprise and fill out its military. But recruiting foreigners also comes at a cost. Diversity in any organization can raise management costs and lead to a range of conflicts between locality-specific goals and the larger goals of foreigners. As Bakke[35] and Rich and Conduit[36] document in the case of foreign participation in the Chechen insurgency against Russia and the Syrian conflict, bringing in transnational fighters can reduce a movement’s local appeal and hinder its cohesion. Together these costs can overwhelm the value of additional personnel and the infusion of skills they may bring. While foreigners clearly fill out the Daesh governance apparatus and military units, we could find no replicable, transparent estimates of the share of the organization’s fighters who come from abroad.

*Daesh economic resources: macro estimates*

We take two approaches to compare the potential value of economic activity in Daesh controlled areas with that of other countries. Both rely on measuring pre-war activity in the areas it now controls. First, we compute an estimate equivalent to gross domestic product based on G-Econ, a widely-used geospatial database of economic activity.[37] Second, we calculate the average nighttime luminosity of Daesh controlled areas. This approach takes advantage of the fact that visible light emissions correlate strongly with economic activity under normal conditions.

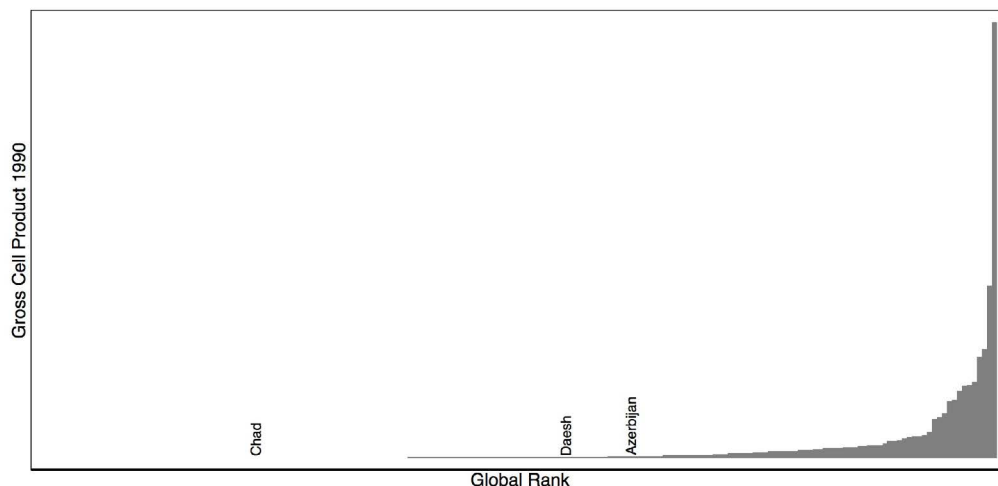
For both approaches we approximate Daesh territory using a geo-referenced March 2015 map of Daesh control from the Institute for the Study of War. The map divides Daesh territory into two areas: (1) the “Support Zone” which is “an area free of significant action against ISIS and which permits effective logistics and administrative support of ISIS forces”; and (2) the “Control Zone” which is “an area where ISIS exerts physical/psychological pressures to assure that individuals/groups respond as directed.” Estimates are similar if we use maps of Daesh control released by the U.S. Department of Defense.

Method 1

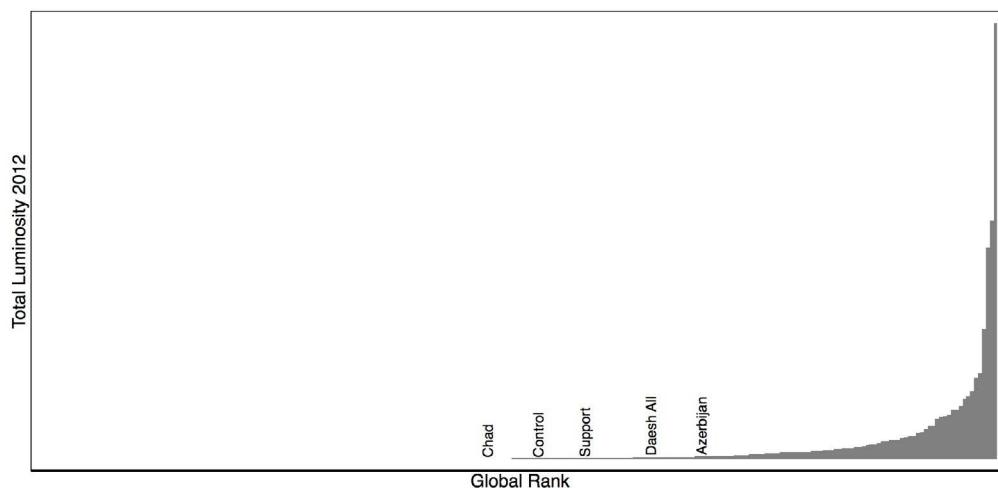
The G-Econ data aggregates local economic activity for each one degree by one degree grid cell of the globe. [38] The method of calculation and available dates vary by country. In Iraq and Syria, the estimates are available for the gross cell product, roughly 110 km by 90 km cells, in 1990. The gross cell product in Iraq is generated from provincial level statistics of labor force participation rate and in agriculture and non-agriculture sectors, national product accounts of output, and oil production for wells in the cell area. Using these data combined with the ISW maps we calculated the total gross cell product for cells with any portion of Daesh control. Since the distribution of economic activity is especially uneven in cells with urban areas, such as Mosul, Iraq, we take a liberal approach of including the gross cell product in the Daesh total if any portion of the cell was under Daesh control. We do not weight the cell by area under Daesh control. This method yields an upper bound on the Daesh economy.

Assuming changes in economic activity for the Daesh cells vis-à-vis other countries have been modest since 1990, we compare the rank of the aggregated Daesh cells to the aggregated cells for all other countries in the same year. Daesh ranks among the poorer countries under this method (see Figure 2a). Pre-war output in areas it now controls was comparable to Cameroon and Cote d’Ivoire.





(a) Gross Cell Product 1990



(b) Luminosity 2012

Figure 2: Global Rank of Daesh Economy

Method 2

The luminosity data comes from the National National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) National Center for Environmental Information (NECI) Version 4 Defense Meteorological Satellite Program’s Operational Linescan System Nighttime Lights Time Series (DMSP-OLS). The luminosity from stable light sources is reported for thirty arc second cells, just under a square kilometer at the equator, on a scale of 0 to 63. We used the 2012 global composite of the stable lights product, which excludes observations of clouds and ephemeral events. We do not correct the data for gas flares as we believe they are relevant for estimating an upper bound on Daesh economic potential. Again, we followed the Institute for the Study of War March 2015 Daesh boundaries to define support and control areas. We calculated the total luminosity for every country and for areas under Daesh support and control.

We compare the rank in aggregated luminosity of Daesh areas with other countries in 2012. While this method draws on more recent data than the gross cell product approach, the Daesh area once again ranked among the world's smaller economies based on output prior to Daesh's involvement (see Figure 2b). Daesh luminosity for combined support and control areas is comparable to Ghana and Uruguay.

### Revenue conclusions

Both methods show that Daesh has limited economic activity to draw on. Daesh area's total economic activity according to G-Econ was at most one-fifth of the rest of Iraq's and one-third of the rest of Syria's. Using the more refined DMSP-OLS data the group's poverty is equally stark, with 2012 illumination in the regions it now controls amounting to no more than one-third of the rest of Syria and one-eighth of the rest of Iraq.

And these methods almost surely overestimate Daesh's current revenue base. First, we included areas of Daesh support from which their economy might draw in part, but it is not clear how much authority the group has to extract in these areas. Second, we use pre-war data, but the massive population movements that accompanied the Daesh takeover means these areas surely have less economic activity than they did in 1990 (for the GEcon data) or 2012 (for the DMSP-OLS data).[39]

Assuming Daesh is able to transform that economic activity into military spending at rates similar to comparably sized states we should not expect it to be able to sustain large defense expenditures. Worldwide defense expenditures peak at 10.2% of GDP in South Sudan, with many conflict-affected countries spending only 3% of GDP on defense.[40] Countries close to Daesh's Gross Cell Product had a 2014 GDP of approximately \$30B or \$4,700 per capita. Combined with the range of observed expenditures this suggests the group could support defense expenditures in the range of \$900M to \$3B per year. While Daesh's potential spending totals are large compared to its economic neighbors, they pale in comparison to Iraq's 2014 spending of \$9.5B, Turkey's \$20B, UAE's \$22.6B, or Saudi Arabia's \$80B.[41] While spending clearly translates only indirectly into military power, the gap between what is monetarily feasible for Daesh over the long-run and what its neighbors spend is striking.

Moreover, if we turn to the population under Daesh's control it is fairly sparse. Figure 3 shows the areas where Daesh was "dominant" in April 2015 according to U.S. Department of Defense estimates with the population estimated by the LandScan program for each grid cell in 2012.[42] Outside of Mosul all the places Daesh controls are quite small, and most of those have seen significant population exodus which the group has had to stem through coercive measures.[43]



Figure 3: Population and Daesh Control

Overall the group simply does not have a large economy to draw on. Unless we believe its institutions will enable it to be uniquely effective at supporting economic activity and extracting revenue over the long run, and the early returns provide no reason to expect that, then we should not anticipate its ability to project military power to increase.

**Comparisons and lessons from elsewhere**

In this section, we compare evidence on Daesh’s economic institutions to what the literature in development economics has found to be important elsewhere. Broadly speaking, development economics explores how firms, governments, and people allocate resources towards productive ends. Much work has focused on the importance of the political and institutional environment for fostering economic growth. This literature implies that Daesh’s long-term revenue-generating potential, and hence ability to project force, hinges on the quality of the economic environment it cultivates. We document several ways in which Daesh falls short of meeting the conditions for economic sustainability.

First, Daesh does not guarantee the legal protection for investments, personal freedoms, and intellectual property that are necessary to spur growth. Firms with secure rights invest more than those without.[44] Individuals with secure land and property rights investment more and have higher output.[45] Political rights for civilians, notably the political empowerment of women and minority groups, have also been shown to enable growth.[46] Given the group’s practice of seizing civilians’ personal property and tenuous

territorial control, there is little evidence that it can provide the kind of predictability needed for its economy to succeed. We can thus expect little in the way of new private investment in Daesh-held areas. Their current productivity likely represents a high point.[47]

Second, Daesh does not allow for access to the kinds of credit and insurance markets potential investors depend on. There are large payoffs to improving access to credit in developing countries. Profits rise when firms have ready access to bank credit and other sources of capital.[48] Credit markets also help individuals save and smooth consumption over risks.[49] Lack of insurance hinders investment. Households without access to insurance save assets as a substitute for insurance when their cash could be more efficiently allocated elsewhere.[50] Besides informal *hawala* networks which allow peer-to-peer insurance, we could find no evidence of substantive social or private insurance markets in Daesh-held areas and individual entrepreneurs in their territory do not have easy access to non-Daesh banking facilities within Daesh territory to obtain credit.

Third, low human capital as a consequence of poor health and education limits growth. Healthy people have greater income potential from both higher productivity and more schooling.[51] Further, access to education yields substantial economic returns[52], and effective public intervention in the market for education can have great impact.[53] Based on other countries' experiences Daesh needs to pay careful attention to civilian human capital investment in order to maintain the well-being of its populace. But it has manifestly failed to do so. By all accounts aggregate health statistics in Daesh-held areas are appalling and these regions have seen significant human capital flight.[54] Moreover, the simple provision of social services touted in Daesh propaganda likely fails to address the underlying constraints to investment in human capital like pricing and access mechanisms.

In addition to the microeconomic evidence on investment, macroeconomic examples of historical growth also illustrate the challenges Daesh will face over the long run. A primary hypothesis of the growth literature is that institutions that provide incentives for investments—e.g. secure property rights—lead to societies that are wealthier in the long run. By contrast, extractive institutions, which inefficiently allocate wealth in the hands of a corrupt few, persist over time and discourage development.[55] Moreover, coercive labor practices such as those reportedly employed by Daesh, can lead to long-run setbacks.[56]

States that begin with institutions unsuitable for economic prosperity can clearly endure; however, we argue that Daesh is distinct from historical examples in this category. Extractive states that persist for long periods tended to allow civilians enough production surplus to invest in future production.[57] Historical evidence suggests that Daesh will need to limit taxation and provide its citizens sufficient certainty in the future that they will save and invest. But if it does the former, then its military capacity will necessarily be constrained as it has a small revenue base to draw on. And if it does the latter it would no longer resemble the group currently in power. Such new institutions would indicate an erosion of defining mentality of the current group that extorts its population at will and offers no opportunity for them to have a say in governance. Moreover, many reports suggest that Daesh imposed their current tax and governance systems in accordance with their religious doctrine. If Daesh leaders genuinely consider their policies to be imperatives of Sharia law, then to alter any of them would violate their theological premise.[58]

Overall, the prominent aspects of the Daesh economy—oil extraction, seizure of assets, and forced labor—are not consistent with the broad characteristics of states that have economic growth, to wit inclusive institutions that beget investment in people, production, and technology. The primary argument for this is intuitive and supported by a broad range of evidence. Arbitrary and unpredictable taxation degrade the incentives to invest, and unstable rights encourage productive people to migrate to where they will benefit from their



labor. Thus, both physical and human capital will decline over time. Evidence from other cases indicates that the conditions for stability in extractive regimes historically would require limits on taxation that are fundamentally in conflict with continued military expansion. Daesh will be able to sustain its economy at current levels only if it adjusts its approach to provide enough certainty so that people who would like to make investments can afford to and can accrue some of the benefits. But if Daesh adopted such institutions or abandoned its effort to expand, it would have changed into something fundamentally different from what it is today.

### *Future directions and policy options*

Thus far, we have established that Daesh's revenue is comprised predominately of resource extraction and extortion over an area with economic potential comparable to poor countries. Further, the group's management of its physical and human capital is not compatible with economic growth. It is difficult to compare the revenue to the expenditure needs since expenditures will depend on a multitude of unknown factors, in particular the group's military strategy. Nevertheless, Daesh is unlikely to acquire the revenue necessary to sustain prolonged war over a large territory. Even if it subsists as a state, it will be fragile. In either scenario, limited revenues indicate that containment is an informed policy option.

Daesh's economy seems insufficient to pursue its stated objectives—i.e., expansion via military force and bribery. A Daesh which seeks to expand is extremely unlikely to be sustainable given the risk of collapse for any state which overextends itself financially. If Daesh seeks to consolidate control over the areas it currently governs instead, then the group's expenditure may remain low and Daesh might be able to endure (barring of course a concerted counter-offensive by neighboring states which would be costly to fight off). This scenario is contradictory to the group's mission; as Wood[59] writes “the waging of war to expand the caliphate is an essential duty of the caliph,” and even if it were to occur, the long-run prospects for Daesh would still be dire. As a poor autocratic state Daesh would likely be fragile and vulnerable to revolt, at least if history is any guide. Since 1991 non-democratic states (those with a Polity2 score of less than 6) with incomes between \$2,000 and \$7,000 per capita (the credible range for Daesh) faced an 18% chance of internal conflict in any given year, while those with lower incomes faced a 25% chance.[60] Whereas the statistical association does not demonstrate that poverty and autocratic government cause coups[61], it does suggest that given existing instability in the territory, revolt will be more likely for Daesh than not. An argument might be made that Daesh would differ from historical trends on account of its strict adherence to conservative ideology. Unless the idea of the caliphate proves to be unusually powerful, ideology will not counteract the impacts of the group's use of oppressive violence to maintain control and tenuous alliances with marginalized groups in the region. And in the event that Daesh is content to be a small, fragile state, then containment remains a suitable strategy.

Thus, regardless of the group's expenditure needs, limited revenues reinforce the rationale for containment. It is, of course, impossible to eliminate the potential externalities from Daesh's existence (e.g. terrorist attacks and the PR value of the “caliphate's” existence). Accordingly, the international community could take actions which will hasten Daesh's economic demise. The foremost challenge in doing so is to avoid compounding the misery of the population under its control, thereby worsening the humanitarian disaster. To strike the right balance, several policies could be considered. First, Iraqi government salaries to employees living in Daesh-controlled areas could be paid in-kind with goods which are less fungible than cash; perishable foodstuffs, for example. This would make it harder for Daesh to turn taxes on salaries into resources to pay fighters or purchase weapons. Second, efforts to inhibit revenue collection should be emphasized. Targeting oil extraction infrastructure is important here, but targeting border checkpoints, revenue offices, and tax officials



could also be considered. Third, public messaging campaigns should emphasize Daesh violations of property rights. Interviews with refugees who had businesses confiscated or who suffered unpredictable shakedowns should feature prominently in Western counter-messaging.

### **Conclusion**

We have argued that Daesh is extremely unlikely to be sustainable from a financial perspective. Its economy is small compared to its enemies, its institutions are not conducive to economic growth, and it is reliant on extractive industries, which in non-democratic environments are easily subject to elite capture and therefore do a poor job of allocating natural resource wealth. Perhaps Daesh's leaders are sufficiently committed to their political goals that they will eschew such opportunities. Maybe they can turn their economy's entire productive capacity to making war in a uniquely efficient way, one with no historical precedent. But the odds are certainly against that.

As such, containment seems a viable strategy to counter Daesh. Given limited economic potential the group will surely struggle to maintain its expansionist strategy, and even if it endures as a fragile state, it will be vulnerable to internal strife. Daesh's inherent economic fragility also implies there may be long-run political benefits in allowing the group to collapse of its own inherent contradictions. Few groups talk about communism or large-scale wealth redistribution as a motivating ideology for rebellion anymore because communism was such a manifest failure as a political project, as evidenced by the collapse of a series of apparently strong communist states from the late-1980s onward. A containment policy towards Daesh will allow the same process to play out with its particularly aggressive *jihadi* ideology. If, instead, the international community takes the lead in defeating the group, then the source of the failure will not be clear and it will take longer for Daesh's motivating ideology to find its proper place in the dustbin of history.

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## Let Them Rot: The Challenges and Opportunities of Containing rather than Countering the Islamic State

by Clint Watts

### Abstract

*A year after invading northern Iraq, the Islamic State has built and governed a state under a long professed jihadi vision. To date, international efforts to counter the Islamic State have been incomplete and hesitant, haunted by recent memories of the U.S. effort to conduct regime change in Iraq. Seeking to avoid deploying military forces into Iraq and Syria, the U.S.-led coalition must examine alternative strategies for uprooting the Islamic State's gains. The Algerian government's use of containment in their campaign against the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) during the 1990s suggest an alternative lens for examining how to defeat the Islamic State from internal pressures rather than external military action. An assessment of "Let Them Rot" as a strategy against the Islamic State suggests it may offer several advantages over sustained direct force, but also reveals many gaps in the current U.S.-led coalition's ability to loosen the group's grasp on Syria and Iraq.*

**Keywords:** Containment, counterinsurgency, ISIS, Jihadism, Iraq, Syria, Algeria

*"You are bound to fail. Only in your spirit and determination are you prepared for war. In all else you are totally unprepared, with a bad cause to start with. At first you will make headway, but as your limited resources begin to fail, shut out from the markets of Europe as you will be, your cause will begin to wane. If your people will but stop and think, they must see in the end that you will surely fail."*

- U.S. General William Tecumseh Sherman's response on 24 December 1860 to the succession of the Confederate States of America. Sherman later conducted the siege of Atlanta en route to defeating the Confederate Army.[1]

The past decade's military efforts to rid the world of jihadi extremism show that overt force alone cannot erode the appeal of jihadi rhetoric and may further foment recruitment to the cause of al Qaeda, IS and affiliated jihadi groups. Case studies from Algeria and lessons learned from the Cold War suggest that if the strategic goal truly is the complete defeat of IS, success will likely come more from IS internal failings rather than external military force. While a strategy of avoidance and negligence can clearly lead to blowback as seen by the fall of Western Iraq just one year ago, deliberate containment of IS may be far more effective over the longer term in bringing about the group's complete defeat through erosion of their local and global popular support. Executing a sustained containment strategy, referred to by the Algerians in their fight against the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) as "Let Them Rot", requires compliance with some basic assumptions and several pre-planned steps.

Much of IS's appeal to global jihadis has been their quest to build a State. From IS's perspective and that of their followers, living under a Caliphate unopposed by outside influences will yield an ideal lifestyle. The appeal of the IS model comes largely from theory rather than reality – only the Taliban in Afghanistan have ruled in such a manner during modern times. Jihadis attracted to IS's vision of statehood have never felt the burdens of living under such a repressive system.

Using external force to prevent the formation of these barbaric extremist versions of a state continues to keep the dream of Sharia governance alive. What might happen if IS were left to its own devices? Would jihadis



living under such a system continue to support the ideology should they be forced to live under their flawed utopia?

### ***Between strategic containment and siege warfare***

Containment strategies for degrading IS have been batted around in both government and public discussions but not seriously examined thus far. At a strategic level, the U.S. and NATO pursued containment as a long-run strategy against the Soviet Union for almost fifty years. In its original form, U.S. diplomat George Kennan introduced containment as a strategy in his work *The Sources of Soviet Conduct* where he outlined an approach in which the U.S. would outlast the Soviets. Kennan viewed the Soviets as an “ideological-political threat” rather than a military one and saw diplomacy and economic investment, now commonly referred to as soft power, as the strategic levers for undermining the Soviet Union. While the U.S. did pursue this approach, often heavily using military force namely in Korea and Vietnam, Kennan in 1994 deemed his own strategy “one of the great disappointments of his life,” citing that containment, “took too long to get results and the costs were too high.”[2] Using the purist version of a containment strategy against IS seems an unacceptable option for the international coalition who lack the patience to sit through IS’s continuing violence, and few diplomatic or economic options are available to undermine the largely self-sufficient IS.

The military equivalent of containment comes in the form of siege warfare. Military historian Matthew Waxman notes that “punishment of civilians is a commonly used strategy of coercion” designed to bring about the end of conflicts.[3] By containing a city or area controlled by one’s adversary, military force can be applied over a sustained duration while exhausting and eliminating the city’s resource base, ultimately leading to the defending military surrendering to save their population. Even at a tactical level, siege warfare seems both unpalatable and impractical in the fight against IS. The international coalition currently lacks the manpower and resources to sufficiently stop IS advances and siege warfare would quickly become logistically intensive. Furthermore, siege warfare’s results have been mixed, with some sieges strengthening the resolve of the population under siege to resist the attackers. Siege warfare against IS might likely increase Sunni Arab popular support under IS and accentuate grievances between Sunni and Shia and between Sunni and the West.

The U.S.-led coalition against IS needs a containment strategy somewhere between Kennan’s containment and siege warfare. As described above, the approach must not rely too heavily on diplomatic and economic levers unavailable in today’s Iraq and Syria setting. Likewise, a containment approach cannot take many years to come to fruition nor further alienate the already disenfranchised Sunni populations under IS control. The strategy must both stop IS advance and turn local populations against IS without employing excessive force. One historical example bridging the gap between international relations containment theory and siege warfare may be the “Let Them Rot” method once utilized selectively in Algeria during the 1990’s.

### ***“Let Them Rot”: The tactics of Algeria in their fight against the GIA***

Algeria fought a particularly bloody war during the 1990s against an internal jihadi group seeking similar aims as IS; the Armed Islamic Group known by the acronym GIA. Algeria initially began fighting the GIA through large-scale military operations, killing many GIA members and many civilians in the process. These military efforts did little to erode popular support for the GIA and in many cases may have further pushed some communities into the arms of the jihadist group.

Recognizing how urban military operations against the GIA often exasperated rather than degraded the GIA, the Algerian military began using a tactic known as “Let Them Rot” against districts that were sympathetic to Islamists, particularly those in Kibylia. Historian Luis Martinez described the “Let Them Rot” tactic as a method “to avoid human losses for non-strategic zones, but also to lessen the demoralizing effects of the ‘dirty job’ on the troops.”[4] The Algerian military isolated districts and deliberately left control to GIA Emirs who implemented their own local version of Sharia governance. The government essentially gave the GIA Emirs exactly what they wanted – an opportunity to govern in accordance with jihadi ideology.

Governance quickly became a burden for local GIA Emirs more versed in insurgency than the minutiae of administration. GIA controlled districts became Islamist ghettos in which populaces sympathetic to the GIA were not allowed to leave. GIA districts became enclaves disconnected with the outside world and rapidly found trouble creating and sustaining legitimate economic industry and services to the populations they governed. Emirs under this state of siege naturally turned to corruption and violence to sustain their hold on the districts.

With time, local populaces who had initially been sympathetic to GIA Emirs saw them instead as the new oppressors, slowly becoming more receptive to the Algerian government as the promises of Sharia governance fell short of reality.[5] After a period of isolation, the Algerian government reemerged offering those under GIA siege opportunities to participate in local militias and new economic programs. Businessmen involved in trade often actively pushed for the formation of militias seeing the breaking of the siege and security of the new militia as a mechanism for economic development. “Private interdepartmental cooperatives” served as a conduit for nationally sponsored employment in security and service positions. This cooperative program looked to sponsor young projects created by entrepreneurs within zones controlled by GIA Emirs.[6] These Algerian government job creation efforts took potential recruits away from the GIA. Ultimately in these select districts, the Algerian government didn’t destroy the GIA, they instead let the GIA defeat itself.

### ***“Let Them Rot” as a strategic approach to countering IS***

Conceptually, “Let Them Rot” as a strategic approach to countering IS may represent an appealing alternative to overt military intervention based on several assumptions currently underlying the situation of present day Syria and Iraq. First, the U.S.-led coalition’s slow and limited response to IS already reflects elements of the “Let Them Rot” approach. For example, the U.S. has sustained air strikes and slowly supported the Iraqi military and Kurdish militias as they’ve advanced and succeeded against IS. Second, those populations living under IS jihadi visions of a caliphate for a year or more do not seem overly enthused by governance implemented by violent, young jihadis. IS’s uneven governance, corrupt practices and harsh violence has created local backlash in some locations currently governed by IS.[7] Three, while IS picked up the jihad where al Qaeda left off, both groups have enticed their followers by promoting a vision of an idealistic jihadi state. Jihadis commonly put forth Western intervention as an excuse for why their vision of statehood has failed. Actually letting IS pursue a state that fails under its own weight will truly erode the faith of believers in jihadi ideology – much in the way the fall of the Soviet Union revealed the shortcomings of communist ideology. This strategy will only work, however, if the local populace perceives the governance failings of IS as the result of the inherent shortcomings of the group’s violent ideology and not as the result of the oppression of the U.S.-led coalition.

Before pursuing the “Let Them Rot” approach as a strategy, we should check several assumptions regarding the local populations under IS rule and the resilience and willingness of the U.S.-led coalition to pursue such an approach. First, local populations subjected to IS governance must be willing to see jihadi ideology as a failed vision even as governance fails. As seen with the decline of the Soviet Union, some Soviet citizens continued to believe in communist ideology and governance despite the economic shortcomings and political collapse mounting around them during the 1980s. As mentioned above, those in IS administering governance and those under IS rule must be willing to accept the failure of jihadi ideology should their governance model collapse. Second, viable security and economic alternatives to IS must be presented to populations subjected to Caliphate governance. Third, local populations governed by IS must be amenable to offered alternatives and the entity that offers them. In Western Iraq for example, local Sunnis may ultimately be willing to repel IS but they likely find little reason to work with a Shia dominated central government. Fourth, the U.S.-led coalition must gain consensus across partner nations on the “Let Them Rot” approach. While all participants have agreed to participate in airstrikes, offering alternative governance strategies or resolving the Syrian conflict may prove difficult amidst the competing interests of participating countries. Fifth, the U.S.-led coalition must observe patience amidst persistent atrocities. To date, IS’s flamboyant terrorist attacks, destruction of historical sites, beheading and burning of captives and unparalleled violence have prompted emotional, visceral responses from participating countries. Sustaining a “Let Them Rot” approach would require nations to stand by and observe but not intervene to stop human rights abuses and refugee flows. Should these assumptions be met, there are several sequenced actions the “Let Them Rot” strategy must adhere to if the approach is to succeed.

### *Containment*

The leading principle of the “Let Them Rot” strategy and all related siege warfare is containment. The Algerians were able to implement the approach as a tactic because the districts to which they laid siege were relatively small and manageable in comparison to the size and scale of today’s IS. The U.S.-led coalition, were it to implement a containment strategy, must seal off the borders of Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and unmarked internal boundary areas in Iraq. While it is likely infeasible to absolutely stop the flow of all humans and goods across some portions of these borders, successful containment at a minimum would require the control, inspection and monitoring of all migration into IS held territory, reducing all manpower and resources available to IS. The containment perimeter would consist of tens of thousands of miles but would be aided by the desert terrain limiting ingress and egress routes to only certain corridors along many of these borders. With the exception of the Israeli border with Syria, each of these border areas currently has significant refugee flows which IS has on many occasions exploited.[8] Implementing effective containment would thus require a significant investment of resources by all partners.

Successfully implementing “Let Them Rot” strategically will require the cutting of not only black market smuggling but the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq. Many border countries may not have the capacity and commitment to seal their borders. Turkey has tacitly permitted the flow of foreign fighters into Syria for nearly four years. Sealing the Turkish border to contain IS will unfortunately harm other militias fighting the Assad regime. Inside Turkey, the border appears littered with jihadi sympathizers.[9] Lebanon, like Turkey, has shown limited capacity to control their eastern border with Syria, which provides a pathway for both Sunni and Shia fighters into the Syrian conflict.

### *Starvation*

Starving IS requires both isolation (through containment) and stripping of their resource base hindering the group's ability to govern. IS's success in developing a state—as compared to the failed attempts of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahel and al Shabaab in Somalia—comes in large part from their ability to consistently self-resource. IS currently blends four key resource streams to successfully resource itself; oil revenues, internal state taxation, illicit schemes and global donations.[10]

Successful containment will hurt many of IS's illicit enterprises and may curb global donations, but this will not significantly hurt the group if it continues to have access to oil revenues which they rely on more than any other stream. Denying IS internal resource support requires removal of IS control over Eastern Syria's oil fields. Their grip on oil fields provides them revenues unmatched by any other jihadi group. Airpower, to date, has done little to nothing in this regard. It is possible that the recent U.S. raid into Eastern Syria killing Abu Sayaf, an IS deputy involved with finance and oil, may represent the international coalition's quest to understand how IS sustains itself via oil operations and devise methods for disrupting this key resource stream.[11]

Assuming both oil revenues and donations from global supporters have stopped, IS will be forced to pursue more legitimate and illicit funding schemes in areas they govern – both would bring consequences for IS sustaining local popular support. Sustained pursuit of legitimate businesses by IS will be tough for cadres of foreign fighters inexperienced with such efforts. Additionally, increased pursuit of legitimate businesses will detract from IS members' ability to conduct security and military operations.[12] Increased reliance on illicit business pursuits will have a further detrimental effect as they prey on local populations harming popular support for IS while at the same time routinely leading to IS members violating tenets of their declared ideology. In the end, disrupting oil revenues, eliminating global donations and increased IS reliance on legitimate and illicit revenue schemes will erode any available local popular support for IS and make alternative security and governance options more attractive to local populations.

Even if left untouched, Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob Shapiro's analysis suggests, “from an economic perspective Daesh (IS) is extremely unlikely to be sustainable.”[13] Hansen-Lewis and Shapiro's macroeconomic analysis suggests regardless of the actions of the U.S.-led coalition, the IS economy is doomed to fail and ripe for the application of a containment strategy. In terms of starvation, the strategic question is whether to actively intervene to eliminate oil revenues and donations or wait over the longer term for IS to degrade economically.

### *Preparing Alternatives*

The Algerian government used “Let Them Rot” as a tactic to entice local traders to seek out an alternative security arrangement for the conduct of business. Traders subjected to the rule of GIA emirs for a sustained period actively pushed for the formation and recruitment of government-backed militias. Despite the harsh implementation of IS's version of Islamic law, many Sunnis in parts of Syria may actually see IS governance as the least bad option for conducting consistent secure business. For example, IS control of highways creates a single tariff across the IS region and removes what was previously a system of roadblocks and shakedowns by local groups across many different stretches of highway. Replicating the approach of the “Let Them Rot” strategy thus requires the full starvation of IS for a period of time, combined with the offering of local Sunni security solutions of equal or greater capability than IS.

The single greatest weakness of implementing a “Let Them Rot” strategy arises in the U.S.-led coalition’s limited ability to provide viable security and economic alternatives in areas currently under IS control. Repulsing IS from within requires a Sunni alternative for security. During the U.S. ‘Surge’ campaign of 2008 and 2009, the “Sons of Iraq” program incentivized Sunni tribes to fight al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Sunni militias assumed repelling extremists in Western and Northern Iraq would result in a larger, more inclusive role in governance after the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Greater Sunni inclusion never materialized and disenfranchisement from a Shia-dominated central Iraqi government remains a prime motivator for Sunnis to permit IS existence. To the east, the Syrian civil war has proven to be an intractable conflict where no viable Sunni militias (non-jihadi) appear capable of emerging.

Generating local security mechanisms after starving IS must come in two forms; one for Syria and one for Iraq. For Syria, Sunni refugee populations repressed by IS can provide some manpower to be trained under the U.S.-led train-and-equip mission started near the end of 2014 and currently moving to full capacity.[14] These new militias will be insufficient to challenge IS. Complimenting those trained and equipped by the U.S.-led coalition must be the coopting of existing Sunni militias currently battling Bashar al-Assad and IS in Syria. However, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has proven to be completely ineffective and unlikely to muster much of a fight. The strongest alternative to IS comes from another unpalatable jihadist group – Jabhat al-Nusra – an al Qaeda affiliate designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. early in the Syrian civil war.

Some alternatives for building Sunni resistance to IS, beyond the coalition’s train-and-equip effort, must be employed to build a sizeable resistance to IS. The Algerian government used a spectrum of approaches to degrade the GIA, only one of which was the “Let Them Rot” tactic, suggesting the U.S.-led coalition must explore options they have considered unpalatable for more than a decade. The Algerian government created amnesty programs for former GIA members and turned some GIA militias back against the GIA. The Algerian amnesty program alone helped dissolve more than 22 GIA militias composed of around 800 militants.[15]

IS today numbers in the tens of thousands and amnesty programs alone would, at best, likely only incentivize local Iraqi fighters and Baathists within IS who, like the local Algerian GIA members, may seek a stake in a post-IS Iraq. International foreign fighters and jihadi veterans of al Qaeda in Iraq now within IS are unlikely to be enticed by such programs, leaving a large demobilization problem should IS fail. Amnesty programs should be considered and exploited when possible, but will not alone be a holistic solution for evaporating IS ranks.

Lacking a strong Sunni partner in Syria, unable to resolve the civil war and incapable of diminishing IS from the east, would the U.S. consider negotiating with Jabhat al-Nusra or work to fracture and utilize the group’s more nationalist elements? Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, during a recent interview with al Jazeera, stated that Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda’s leader, told Jawlani, “to refrain from attacking the West and America from Shaam (Syria).”[16] Many believe Jawlani and Jabhat al-Nusra might possibly defect from al Qaeda altogether. Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al Sham have been two of the most viable counter-forces to IS.[17] Should the U.S.-led coalition truly seek to supplant IS in the east, they will need to develop an amnesty and negotiation strategy to build their Sunni ranks.

Creating security alternatives to IS in Iraq faces different challenges. Sunni tribes distrust the Iraqi central government. IS has also mobilized former Baathist members of the Iraqi military declared unfavorable by the U.S. a decade ago. Regaining Sunni support for a local security solution may possibly come in two ways.



First, if the U.S.-led coalition can degrade IS in Iraq halting the group's territorial gains, former Baathists and local Sunnis less committed to IS ideologically may seek to maintain their local powerbase upon an IS collapse. Local Iraqi IS powerbrokers will be ripe for defection and through brokering may be inclined to break with IS to secure their local stake. A similar phenomenon has occurred in Somalia over the past three years as Shabaab clannish middle managers have split with the group under pressure from a growing coalition.[18] Second, if the U.S.-led coalition were open to alternative Iraqi governance structures, this may also entice Sunnis to break with IS. The U.S. and countries in the region resoundingly rejected a three-state federation governance model a decade ago. However, providing Sunnis the opportunity for autonomous or semi-autonomous governance in Anbar province of Iraq may bring about needed resistance to IS's current dominance.

Pursuing the "Let Them Rot" strategy presents a challenge of equal difficulty as security – the offering of economic alternatives. In Algeria, the "Let Them Rot" tactic was complimented with job creation efforts that took potential recruits away from the GIA. 'Private interdepartmental cooperatives' provided nationally backed employment. Cooperative programs sponsored projects created by entrepreneurs within these zones. [19] Currently in both Syria and Iraq, local economies survive under IS and provide the group a tax base from which to operate. At present, no central governance structure on the Syrian side exists to provide an organized economic system to replace IS. In Iraq, a petroleum-based economy will perplex most any effort to provide economic alternatives. Identifying and empowering economic alternatives as part of a "Let Them Rot" strategy might prove completely infeasible.

### ***Developing and Exploiting Fractures***

The "Let Them Rot" strategy, as a whole, essentially seeks to fracture IS through three steps – containment, starvation and development of alternatives. Analysis of IS manpower and financial resources indicates the single biggest driver of the group's unity comes from their military success leading to territorial gains. Halting IS current advances and slowly pushing them back in Iraq and into eastern Syria would ideally develop several fractures within the ranks available for exploitation.

IS manpower would likely crack along three key fault lines when contained and under stress from the U.S.-led coalition. First in Iraq, the key fissure for exploitation would be between legacy jihadis of last decades' al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq and former Baathists and Sunni tribesmen now riding the IS wave to power. As discussed previously, local Sunni tribesmen and Baathists fighting with IS may be incentivized to defect as IS either loses ground or fails to govern as a result of starvation.

In Syria, the key fractures in a crumbling IS may come in two different ways. First, the international foreign fighters in Syria differ considerably in nationality from IS's jihadi leaders who are by some estimates more than 90% Iraqi and appear principally interested in fighting in Iraq.[20] Breaking the bonds between the international volunteers that sustain IS in Syria and the Iraqi dominated leadership would create negative incentives in global IS recruitment pipelines. The second key fissure for exploitation in Syria will be between IS and other jihadi, Islamist and nationalist militias in Syria. IS for a sustained period has used basic cash incentives combined with battlefield victories to entice fighters from other militias in Syria. Starving IS of resources while allowing competitors to grow stronger and new militias to form may incentivize further defections from IS in Syria.

The most fruitful consequence of starving IS across these three fault lines would likely be inter-IS violence resulting in the killing off of defectors in the ranks. As seen by Shabaab's killing of its popular American

foreign fighter Omar Hammami and the spilling of foreign fighter blood between Jabhat al-Nusra and IS during the spring of 2014, jihadi fratricide more than any other act clearly erodes global support for jihadi campaigns.[21] IS has reportedly already killed off defectors in its ranks. Rami Abdulrahman, Head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, stated that 116 foreign fighters, who had joined ISIL (IS) but later wanted to return home, were executed in the Syrian provinces of Deir Ezzor, Raqqa and Hasakeh since November (2014)."[22] Starved of resources and under pressure, IS senior leaders will likely continue and expand internal killings to maintain control over their troops.

### *Assessing the “Let Them Rot” strategy for fighting ISIS*

The “Let Them Rot” strategy, on the surface, provides several perceived advantages for an international coalition loath to military ground intervention. Containing IS such that they die from internal failure rather than external force may have a more enduring long-run effect in limiting the bleed-out of jihadi foreign fighters fueling Islamic insurgencies around the world. The more IS’s Caliphate fails, the less likely future jihadis will be to pursue a similar concept in other battlegrounds.

A containment and starvation campaign by the U.S.-led coalition not only undermines the jihadi narrative of pursuing a state but provides two key advantages to those countering IS. First, containment over invasion conserves the resources of the U.S.-led coalition – no participating nation seeks to expend resources at the pace and scale the U.S. did last decade. Second, containment as opposed to military invasion prevents further unintended violence against and resulting backlash from local Iraqi and Syrian populations caught in the crossfire.

Despite these advantages, the “Let Them Rot” strategy may be incongruent to the disparate needs of participating nations. Pursuing this strategy may prove difficult given the power struggle between Sunni Arab nations and the Iranian-backed Assad regime and Iraqi central government. Serious doubts remain as to whether partner nations can truly seal their borders to contain IS or collaboratively develop alternative security forces, economic incentives and resulting governance to occupy any space left behind by IS. For the U.S., it is unlikely that the train-and-equip mission will ever be sufficient to repel IS. At the same time, the U.S. seems set against amnesty programs or negotiation with any existing group in Syria or Iraq with ties to jihadi groups – a position leaving the coalition with few if any alternatives. Most importantly, the “Let Them Rot” strategy, or any other for that matter, seems unlikely to succeed absent a larger effort to end the Syrian civil war. The Algerians were successful in defeating the GIA because they had unity in their command and controlled the entire battle space under which the GIA operated. Today, the U.S.-led coalition can drive success through Iraqi and Kurdish forces. But IS sustains safe haven in two different countries; losses in Iraq can be recouped through unmet advances in Syria. Even if Iraq was retaken, Syria would continue to provide safe haven for IS.

As time moves forward and IS continues its advance, one might wonder if the U.S.-led coalition will pursue the “Let Them Rot” strategy by choice, or maybe instead, by default.

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## II. Resources

### Bibliography: Islamic State (Part 1)

Compiled and selected by Judith Tinnes

[Bibliographic Series of Perspectives on Terrorism - BSPT-JT-2015-4]

#### Abstract

*This bibliography contains journal articles, book chapters, books, edited volumes, theses, grey literature, bibliographies and other resources on the Islamic State (IS / ISIS / ISIL / Daesh) and its predecessor organizations. To keep up with the rapid changing political events, more recent publications have been prioritized during the selection process. The literature has been retrieved by manually browsing more than 200 core and periphery sources in the field of Terrorism Studies. Additionally, full-text and reference retrieval systems have been employed to expand the search.*

**Keywords:** bibliography, resources, literature, Islamic State, IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, AQI

NB: All websites were last visited on 19.07.2015. - See also Note for the Reader at the end of this literature list.

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### Note

Whenever retrievable, URLs for freely available versions of subscription-based publications have been provided. Thanks to the Open Access movement, self-archiving of publications in institutional repositories or on author homepages for free public use (so-called Green Open Access) has become more common. Please note, that the content of Green Open Access documents is not necessarily identical to the officially published versions (e.g., in case of pre-prints); it might therefore not have passed through all editorial stages publishers employ to ensure quality control (peer review, copy and layout editing etc.). In some cases, articles may only be cited after getting consent by the author(s).

**About the compiler:** Judith Tinnes, Ph.D., studied Information Science and New German Literature and Linguistics at the Saarland University (Germany). Her *doctoral thesis* dealt with Internet usage of Islamist terrorists and insurgents. Currently she works in the research & development department of the Leibniz Institute for Psychology Information ([ZPID](http://www.zpid.de)). She also serves as Editorial Assistant for 'Perspectives on Terrorism'.

### III. Notes from the Editor

#### Job Announcement: CTSS Director

University of Massachusetts Lowell

School of Criminology and Justice Studies

Job Reference Number: 0081469

Position Title: Director–Center for Terrorism and Security Studies

*Description: The University of Massachusetts Lowell is recruiting for a senior faculty position, at the rank of Professor or Associate Professor, to serve as Director of its Center for Terrorism and Security Studies (CTSS).*

CTSS was established in 2013 in connection with the University's growing academic enterprise in the field of terrorism and security studies. Concurrent with the Center's growth in recent years, the College of Fine Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences has established a terrorism studies option within the PhD program in Criminal Justice housed in the School of Criminology and Justice Studies, launched M.S. and M.A. degree programs in Security Studies, initiated a PhD program in Global Studies, and hired several new social science faculty with research programs in the areas of security, terrorism, and international conflict. Additionally, a significant number of faculty within both the University's College of Engineering and its College of Sciences are extensively engaged in funded research programs focused on matters of national and international security.

The successful candidate for this position will have proven leadership capacity, a strong record of procuring external funding, experience managing large-scale research projects, and a sustained portfolio of high-quality published scholarship in the field of terrorism and security studies. This candidate will also demonstrate a vision for promoting the Center as an inter-disciplinary community that encourages innovative collaboration, supports the mentoring and development of junior faculty, and actively engages students enrolled in the College's graduate and undergraduate education programs. Beyond his or her role in managing the Center, the selected candidate will teach courses within the College, particularly within the graduate programs in terrorism, security studies, and global studies.

Faculty appointment is available in the School of Criminology and Justice Studies, the Department of Political Science, the Department of Psychology, or in another department consistent with the selected candidate's preference and disciplinary orientation. Joint departmental appointments may be made where appropriate, and tenure upon entry will be offered to qualified candidates.

The University is committed to increasing the gender and racial/ethnic diversity of its faculty to match that of our student body. Candidates who can contribute to that goal are strongly encouraged to apply, and should identify in their cover letter how their personal and professional experiences can help us achieve this goal.

#### **Minimum Qualifications:**

- Ph.D. (or equivalent) in criminology, political science, security studies, international relations, psychology, sociology, or other discipline relevant to the area of security studies

- Six years of post-PhD experience at a research university
- Demonstrated experience developing and leading funded research projects related to terrorism and security studies
- Sustained record of high-quality publication in field of terrorism and security studies
- The ability to work effectively with diverse groups

Salary commensurate with experience. Review of applications will begin **November 1, 2015** and continue until the position is filled.

To apply, please see: <https://jobs.uml.edu/applicants/Central?quickFind=54400>

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## About *Perspectives on Terrorism*

*Perspectives on Terrorism* (PT) is a joint publication of the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI), headquartered in Vienna, Austria, and the Center for Terrorism and Security Studies (CTSS), headquartered at the Lowell Campus of the University of Massachusetts, United States of America.

PT is published six times per year as a free peer-reviewed online journal available at [www.terrorismanalysts.com](http://www.terrorismanalysts.com). It seeks to provide a platform for established scholars as well as academics and professionals entering the interdisciplinary fields of Terrorism, Political Violence and Conflict Studies. The editors invite readers to:

- present their perspectives on the prevention of, and response to, terrorism and related forms of violent conflict;
- submit to the journal accounts of evidence-based, empirical scientific research and analyses;
- use the journal as a forum for debate and commentary on issues related to the above.

*Perspectives on Terrorism* has sometimes been characterised as ‘nontraditional’ in that it dispenses with some of the traditional rigidities associated with commercial print journals. Topical articles can be published at short notice and reach, through the Internet, a much larger audience than subscription-fee based paper journals. Our free on-line journal also offers contributors a higher degree of flexibility in terms of content, style and length of articles – but without compromising professional scholarly standards.

The journal’s articles are peer-reviewed by members of the Editorial Board as well as outside experts. While aiming to be policy-relevant, PT does not support any partisan policies regarding (counter-) terrorism and conflict-waging. Impartiality, objectivity and accuracy are guiding principles that we require contributors to adhere to.

### *Editorial Team of Perspectives on Terrorism*

**Alex P. Schmid**, Editor-in-Chief

**James J.F. Forest**, Co-Editor

**Joseph J. Easson**, Associate Editor

**Joshua Sinai**, Books Reviews Editor

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