

Understanding the Islamic State (of Iraq and al-Sham)

By Cole Bunzel

■ Executive summary

The recent successes of the Islamic State (of Iraq and al-Sham) have set it on an ascendant path, culminating in its declaration on June 29th 2014 of a restored caliphate or global Islamic empire. Both in the larger domain of Arab politics and in the much narrower world of jihadism, the Islamic State has made considerable strides and is poised to continue to do so.

This expert analysis attempts to cast light on the Islamic State, with a view to better understanding the circumstances and implications of its recent successes in Syria and Iraq. In its extensive literature and numerous videos distributed online, and in its political and religious activities on the ground, the Islamic State has revealed a great deal about itself.

The group is highly professional and has an ambitious state-building project some eight years in the making. Its leadership, while ideologically uncompromising, is also politically pragmatic and financially savvy. It is no coincidence that it is the Islamic State and not some other group that has succeeded in taking advantage of the current political turmoil in Syria and Iraq.

The 12 months to June 2014 have witnessed the sudden rise of the jihadi group known as the Islamic State, which was born in 2006 as the Islamic State of Iraq and was known from April 2013 to June 2014 as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (with al-Sham referring to the lands of greater Syria). Currently the Islamic State is nothing short of a polity governing a large swathe of territory comprising large parts of northern Syria and north-western Iraq. Most recently it has made rapid advances into Iraq, with its most significant capture being Mosul, the country's second-largest city.

No doubt this advance across Iraq owes much to Sunni Arab grievances against the Shia-dominated government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. Most Sunni Arabs in Islamic State-controlled Iraq, while celebrating their "liberation" from Shia overlordship, do not embrace the jihadi ideology and worldview of their new rulers. Nonetheless, the Islamic State's appeal and potential are not to be dismissed.

The group – or "state" (*dawla*), as it insists on being called – is no amateur band of religious fanatics taking advantage

of favourable circumstances. Rather, it constitutes a highly professional and ambitious state-building project some eight years in the making. Its leadership, while ideologically uncompromising, is also politically pragmatic and financially savvy. It is no coincidence that it is the Islamic State, and not some other group, that has succeeded in taking advantage of the current political turmoil in Syria and Iraq. A review of its history and nature will shed some light on the policy challenges that it currently poses.

Situating the Islamic State

The Islamic State belongs to the distinct politico-theological school in modern Islam known as jihadi-Salafism (*al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya*), or jihadism for short. This radical Sunni ideology is premised on the waging of perpetual religious war – jihad – against the "apostate" regimes of the Arab world and their foreign supporters. Traditionally it has been espoused and led by al-Qa'ida and its affiliates, but jihadism also comprises a looser network of like-minded thinkers and strategists connected online and via social media. Al-Qa'ida does not have a monopoly over the

jihadi movement, the Islamic State being a case in point. Much more al-Qa'ida's competitor than its ally, the Islamic State has distinguished itself from al-Qa'ida's brand of jihadism in two crucial respects, one ideological and the other organisational.

Ideologically the Islamic State adopts a more exclusionary conception of Islam, being less tolerant of perceived deviant Islamic sects, particularly Shiism. In other words, it pursues a more anti-Shia policy, focusing on igniting sectarian warfare, and in this way perpetuates the legacy of the notorious jihadi leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (d. 2006) and his now-defunct group, al-Qa'ida in Iraq.

Organisationally the Islamic State claims to be not merely a jihadi organisation (*tanзим*), but rather literally what its name implies: a fully fledged sovereign state (*dawla*). What is more, it is a state with expansionist ambitions. Since its founding its leaders have vowed to conquer more and more territory until ultimately reconstituting the caliphate, or global Islamic empire, and on June 29th 2014 they declared the caliphate to be restored. At its head stands as caliph an obscure Iraqi known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Islamic State maintains it is incumbent on all Muslims to pledge an oath of allegiance to him known as *bay'a*.

These two features of the group – its militant exclusivism and its claim to be not only a state, but the caliphate – underlie both its motives and, unfortunately, its global appeal to a minority of Muslims. Its political experience, as detailed below, helps explain its strategic pragmatism.

The Islamic State before the Syrian civil war

The idea of founding an Islamic state or emirate in the centre of the Middle East has long been a jihadi aspiration, propounded on numerous occasions in particular by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qa'ida and successor to Usama bin Ladin (d. 2011). But the jihadi movement that came to the fore in the central Arab lands following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 had its differences with the al-Qa'ida leadership. The Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (Group of Unity and Jihad) led by Zarqawi focused its efforts not only on expelling the foreign invaders, but also on terrorising Iraq's majority Shia Arab population. In 2004 Zarqawi gave his allegiance (*bay'a*) to bin Ladin and rebranded his group al-Qa'ida in Iraq, but al-Qa'ida's leaders continued to chide him for his sectarian bloodletting and extreme violence that alienated a large number of Iraqis.

After Zarqawi was killed by U.S. forces in 2006 his group was quickly superseded by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Former members of al-Qa'ida in Iraq formed the dominant element in the newfound "state", but they ceased to have any proper affiliation to al-Qa'ida. They were the majority of a "council" of jihadi fighters who coalesced in October 2006 to proclaim the "Islamic State".

ISI, it is important to emphasise, was conceived from the very beginning as an independent jihadi entity and not as a subsidiary of al-Qa'ida. Zawahiri has stated publicly that al-Qa'ida was never consulted on the matter of the Islamic State's founding and the available evidence suggests that ISI has never had more than tenuous links with the al-Qa'ida leadership. Moreover, the Islamic State's leaders have always publicly asserted their independence as *the Islamic State*, inspired by the original Islamic state founded by the Prophet Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia, whence it expanded to conquer North Africa, the Middle East and parts of Europe. An official ISI document from 2006 asserted: "This state of Islam has arisen anew to strike down its roots in the region, as was the religion's past one of strength and glory." It furthermore envisioned limitless territorial expansion and the eventual re-establishment of the caliphate. In other words, ISI was to be the kernel of the renascent global Islamic empire.

Accordingly, the group's leader took the title *amir al-mu'minin* ("commander of the believers"), the traditional caliphal title. Its first leader, Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi (d. 2010), claimed the important distinction of descent from the Prophet Muhammad's tribe of Quraysh. The claim was meant to highlight his potential for assuming the role of caliph, as traditional Sunni political theory stipulates descent from the Prophet's tribe as a precondition for assuming the supreme office.

The ambitious plan of the Islamic State, however, failed to take off initially. Both the U.S. troop surge in 2006 and the "Awakening Councils" movement among the Sunni Arab tribes helped win the loyalty of Iraq's Sunnis to the Baghdad government. The Islamic State continued to wreak sectarian havoc, but failed to gain a following. Meanwhile, U.S. and Iraqi forces put the group on the defensive, and in mid-2010 killed its first leader. His successor and the Islamic State's current leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also takes the title "commander of the believers" and claims descent from Quraysh.

As for Baghdadi himself, he is a shadowy figure who only occasionally releases audio statements online and never appeared in public until July 4th 2014, when he gave a surprise sermon at the Grand Mosque of Mosul. According to Western and jihadi sources, his real identity is Ibrahim ibn 'Awwad al-Badri, some 40 years of age and originally from Samarra in Iraq. He holds a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence from the Islamic University in Baghdad and worked as a mosque leader before joining the Sunni insurgency in 2003. Little more about him is known with certainty, other than that he commands tremendous respect among his fighters and speaks impeccable Arabic in his audio statements.

Beyond ideology and leadership, the Islamic State has adopted a sophisticated business model that allowed the group to survive several years of decline prior to its recent successes. Rather than relying on outside donations, such

as money from individual donors in the Persian Gulf states, it managed – and continues to manage – to fundraise among its own members in diverse ways, such as the extortion of oil money and kidnappings for ransom, and has kept detailed financial records.

The Islamic State after the Syrian civil war

In mid-2011 Baghdadi's ISI began to see a reversal of fortunes with the onset of the uprising against the Alawite-Shia regime of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria. The Sunni-majority country was ripe territory for ISI and its anti-Shia emphasis. Baghdadi tasked one of his Syrian commanders, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, with establishing a front group for ISI in Syria. This was the origin of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), which soon ballooned in popularity to attract thousands of foreign recruits to its bases in northern Syria.

By April 2013, however, Baghdadi had become suspicious of Jawlani, convinced that the latter was extricating his new group from ISI's suzerainty. Therefore, in a surprise audio message he proclaimed the dissolution of JN and the extension of the Islamic State to the lands of greater Syria (al-Sham). ISI was thereafter known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Jawlani objected to Baghdadi's decision, refusing to disband JN and openly pledging *bay'a* to Zawahiri. JN thus became an al-Qa'ida affiliate, with Zawahiri supporting his move and publicly instructing Baghdadi to limit his group's activities to Iraq. But Baghdadi rejected Zawahiri's instructions and expanded ISIS's activities to Syria anyway. Most foreign fighters and many JN commanders joined ISIS. The feud between JN and the Islamic State is ongoing.

In its activities in Syria the Islamic State has focused more on seizing and administering territory than on fighting the Assad regime. Since May 2013 it has held sway in the large city of Raqqa on the Euphrates River, where it has rigorously implemented its version of Islamic law, i.e. establishing sharia courts; prohibiting drinking, smoking, dancing and music; enforcing the full veiling of women; and carrying out the canonical punishments against wrongdoers and "apostates" – amputations, beheadings and even crucifixions.

Yet even with such application of the sharia, the Islamic State has been at pains not to alienate the population. As much as it seeks to intimidate those under its rule, it also attempts to spread its religious message to them through public preaching (*da'wa*). There is an office of repentance for former opponents of the Islamic State wishing to make amends. The Islamic State also sees to the more mundane tasks of administration in the areas it has conquered such as policing streets, supplying electricity and overseeing commerce. The work of governance, of course, requires financial resources, and the Islamic State has proved adept at the illegal export of oil under its control, while Gulf financing remains only a minor part of its overall financial portfolio.

In short, after failing to win the hearts and minds of the Sunni Arabs of Iraq in the post-2006 period, the Islamic State in its various forms has followed a new strategy that is as much pragmatic as it is ideological. The group has sought to win over as many potential supporters as it can.

Those in Syria most opposed to the Islamic State have been the more moderate Islamist rebel fighters of rival groups, who are particularly aggrieved at the Islamic State's claim to statehood and the unique sovereignty that this implies. In disputes with other groups, the Islamic State has refused to participate in mutual arbitration on the grounds that, as *the* Islamic State, only it has the right to adjudicate such cases. It thus recognises only its own jurisdiction and expects all other groups to accept its universal dominion and give *bay'a* to Baghdadi. Another point of contention between the Islamic State and other Islamist fighters in Syria concerns borders. Whereas most Syrian fighters are content with establishing an Islamic state within the modern territory of Syria, the Islamic State views all modern boundaries as meaningless. But to many Syrian fighters the Islamic State is a foreign entity that has no business outside Iraq. These grievances culminated in a general uprising against the group in January 2014 by numerous opposition fighters. The uprising only subsided when the Islamic State chose the pragmatic course, abandoning territories it only partially held and focusing on those firmly under its grip, such as Raqqa.

Six months later, in June 2014, the Islamic State launched its surprise campaign in northern and western Iraq, seizing almost all Sunni Arab territory there and expelling the Iraqi security forces. Its greatest prize was Mosul, a city with a population of nearly two million where the group's fighters have reportedly seized more than \$400 million from banks and freed thousands of former Sunni insurgents from prisons. In a sign of its pragmatism, the Islamic State has coordinated its Iraq campaign with former members of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist government; it has also adopted a gradual approach to implementing the sharia in Mosul, rescinding an earlier charter for the city outlining new sharia provisions. In terms of strategy, the Islamic State has kept up the military offensive against the Shia government in Baghdad, hoping to polarise the country along sectarian lines while gradually consolidating its rule in the newly conquered areas.

Conclusion

The Islamic State has played its hand exceedingly well in the one year and several months since its expansion to Syria. It has successfully competed with al-Qa'ida for the mantle of jihadism and demonstrated that its claim to constitute an actual state in Iraq and Syria is no delusion, but an actual fact. In the long run its fierce ideology may alienate the populations it seeks to govern, but for the moment its anti-Shia focus falls on receptive ears in both Syria and Iraq, where sectarian grievances against the Assad and Maliki regimes, respectively, loom large. It also

now enjoys unprecedented financial resources and manpower.

The threat that the Islamic State poses is long term but, for the most part, confined to the region. Given its strategic emphasis on the so-called “near enemy” (Arab, particularly

Shia, regimes) over the “far enemy” (Western states), the Islamic State poses a much more dire threat to its neighbours than it does to Europe and the U.S. Actual or perceived Western military action against it, however, could change this strategic calculus. ■

■ THE AUTHOR

Cole Bunzel is a PhD candidate in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, where his research focuses on the religious history of Saudi Arabia. He is a contributor to the website Jihadica.

Disclaimer

The content of this publication is presented as is. The stated points of view are those of the author and do not reflect those of the organisations to which he is affiliated or NOREF. NOREF does not give any warranties, either expressed or implied, concerning the content.



- The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre
- Norsk ressurscenter for fredsbygging

The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) is a resource centre integrating knowledge and experience to strengthen peacebuilding policy and practice. Established in 2008, it collaborates and promotes collaboration with a wide network of researchers, policymakers and practitioners in Norway and abroad.

Read NOREF's publications on www.peacebuilding.no and sign up for notifications.

Connect with NOREF on Facebook or @PeacebuildingNO on Twitter

Email: info@peacebuilding.no - Phone: +47 22 08 79 32