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ISIS : Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

The Islamic State (IS), formerly the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS is a Sunni jihadist group in the Middle East. In its self-proclaimed status as a caliphate, it claims religious authority over all Muslims across the world and aspires to bring most of the Muslim-inhabited regions of the world under its political control beginning with Iraq, Syria and other territories in the Levant region which include Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Cyprus and part of southern Turkey. It has been designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, and has been described by the United Nations and Western and Middle Eastern media as a terrorist group and by other countries such as Colombia as a fundamentalist and extremist organization. The United Nations and Amnesty International have accused the group of grave human rights abuses.

The Islamic State, still widely known as ISIS or ISIL, originated as Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in 1999. This group was the forerunner of Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn—later commonly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)—a group formed by Abu Musab Al Zarqawi in 2004 which took part in the Iraqi insurgency against American-led forces and their Iraqi allies following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. During the 2003–2011 Iraq War, it joined other Sunni insurgent groups to form the Mujahideen Shura Council and consolidated further into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). At its height it enjoyed a significant presence in the Iraqi governorates of Al Anbar, Nineveh, Kirkuk, most of Salah ad Din, parts of Babil, Diyala and Baghdad, and claimed Baqubah as a capital city. However, the violent attempts by the Islamic State of Iraq to govern its territory led to a backlash from Sunni Iraqis and other insurgent groups circa 2008, which helped to propel the Awakening movement and a temporary decline in the group.

ISIS grew significantly under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, gaining support in Iraq as a result of alleged economic and political discrimination against Iraqi Sunnis. Then, after entering the Syrian Civil War, it established a large presence in the Syrian governorates of Ar-Raqqah, Idlib, Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo. In June 2014, it had at least 4,000 fighters in its ranks in Iraq. It has claimed responsibility for attacks on government and military targets and for attacks that killed thousands of civilians. In August 2014, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claimed that the number of fighters in the group had increased to 50,000 in Syria and 30,000 in Iraq, while the CIA estimated in September 2014 that in both countries it had between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters. ISIS had close links to al-Qaeda until February 2014 when, after an eight-month power struggle, al-Qaeda cut all ties with the group, reportedly for its brutality and "notorious intractability".

ISIS's original aim was to establish a caliphate in the Sunni-majority regions of Iraq, and following its involvement in the Syrian Civil War this expanded to include controlling Sunni-majority areas of Syria. A caliphate was proclaimed on 29 June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—now known as Amir al-Mu'minin Caliph Ibrahim—was named as its caliph, and the group was renamed the Islamic State.

Name and name changes

Since its formation in early 1999; as Jamā'at al-Tawḥīd wa-al-Jihād, "The Organization of Monotheism and Jihad" (JTJ), the group has had a number of different names, including some that other groups use for it.

In October 2004, the group leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi swore loyalty to Osama bin Laden and changed the name of the group to *Tanzīm Qā'idat al-Jihād fī Bilād al-Rāfidayn*, "The Organization of Jihad's Base in the Country of the Two Rivers," more commonly known as "Al-Qaeda in Iraq" (AQI). Although the group has never called itself "Al-Qaeda in Iraq", this name has frequently been used to describe it through its various incarnations.

In January 2006, AQI merged with several smaller Iraqi insurgent groups under an umbrella organization called the "Mujahideen Shura Council". This was claimed to be little more than a media exercise and an attempt to give the group a more Iraqi flavour and perhaps to distance al-Qaeda from some of al-Zarqawi's tactical errors, notably the 2005 bombings by AQI of three hotels in Amman. Al-Zarqawi was killed in June 2006, after which the group direction shifted again.

On 12 October 2006, the Mujahideen Shura Council joined four more insurgent factions and the representatives of a number of Iraqi Arab tribes, and together they swore the traditional Arab oath of allegiance known as *Ḥilf al-Muṭayyabīn* ("Oath of the Scented Ones"). During the ceremony, the participants swore to free Iraq's Sunnis from what they described as Shia and foreign oppression, and to further the name of Allah and restore Islam to glory.

On 13 October 2006, the establishment of the *Dawlat al-'Iraq al-Islāmīyah*, "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI) was announced. A cabinet was formed and Abu Abdullah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi became ISI's figurehead emir, with the real power residing with the Egyptian Abu Ayyub al-Masri. The declaration was met with hostile criticism, not only from ISI's jihadist rivals in Iraq, but from leading jihadist ideologues outside the country. Al-Baghdadi and al-Masri were both killed in a US–Iraqi operation in April 2010. The next leader of the ISI was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the current leader of ISIS.

On 8 April 2013, having expanded into Syria, the group adopted the name "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant", also known as "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham." The name is abbreviated as ISIS or alternately ISIL. The final "S" in the acronym ISIS stems from the Arabic word *Shām* (or *Shaam*), which in the context of global jihad—as in *Jund al-Sham*, for example—refers to the Levant or Greater Syria. ISIS was also known as *al-Dawlah* ("the State"), or *al-Dawlat al-Islāmīyah* ("the Islamic State"). These are short-forms of the name "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" in Arabic.

ISIS's detractors, particularly in Syria, refer to the group as "Da'ish" or "Daesh", a term that is based on an acronym formed from the letters of the name in Arabic, *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wa ash-Sham*. The group considers the term derogatory and reportedly uses flogging as a punishment for people who use the acronym in ISIS-controlled areas.

On 14 May 2014, the United States Department of State announced its decision to use "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) as the group's primary name. The debate over which acronym should be used to designate the group, ISIL or ISIS, has been discussed by several commentators.

On 29 June 2014, the establishment of a new caliphate was announced, and the group formally changed its name to the "Islamic State".

In late August 2014, a leading Islamic authority *Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah* in Egypt advised Muslims to stop calling the group "Islamic State" and instead refer to it as "Al-Qaeda Separatists in Iraq and Syria" or "QISIS", because of the militant group's un-Islamic character.

Ideology and beliefs

ISIS is a Sunni extremist group that follows al-Qaeda's hard-line ideology and adheres to global jihadist principles. Like al-Qaeda and many other modern-day jihadist groups, ISIS emerged from the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, the world's first Islamist group dating back to the late 1920s in Egypt. ISIS follows an extreme anti-Western interpretation of Islam, promotes religious violence and regards those who do not agree with its interpretations as infidels or apostates. Concurrently, ISIS—now IS—aims to establish a Salafist-orientated Islamist state in Iraq, Syria and other parts of the Levant.

ISIS's ideology originates in the branch of modern Islam that aims to return to the early days of Islam, rejecting later "innovations" in the religion which it believes corrupt its original spirit. It condemns later caliphates and the Ottoman empire for deviating from what it calls pure Islam and hence has been attempting to establish its own caliphate. However, some Sunni commentators, including Salafi and jihadi muftis such as Adnan al-Aroor and Abu Basir al-Tartusi, say that ISIS and related terrorist groups are not Sunnis, but modern-day Kharijites—Muslims who have stepped outside the mainstream of Islam—serving an imperial anti-Islamic agenda. Other critics of ISIS's brand of Sunni Islam include Salafists who previously publicly supported jihadist groups including al-Qaeda, for example the Saudi government official Saleh Al-Fawzan claims that ISIS is a creation of “Zionists, Crusaders and Safavids”, and the Jordanian-Palestinian writer Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi who was released from Jordanian prison in June, 2014.

Salafists such as ISIS believe that only a legitimate authority can undertake the leadership of jihad, and that the first priority over other areas of combat, such as fighting non-Muslim countries, is the purification of Islamic society. For example, when it comes to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, since ISIS regards the Palestinian Sunni group Hamas as apostates who have no legitimate authority to lead jihad, it regards fighting Hamas as the first step toward confrontation with Israel.

Goals

Since 2004, the group's goal has been the foundation of an Islamic state in the Levant. Specifically, ISIS seeks the establishment of a caliphate, a type of Islamic state led by a group of religious authorities under a supreme leader—caliph—who is believed to be the successor to Mohammed. In June 2014, ISIS published a document which it claimed linked ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to the prophet. That same month, ISIS removed "Iraq and the Levant" from its name and began to refer to itself as the Islamic State, declaring the territory that it occupied in Iraq and Syria a new caliphate and naming al-Baghdadi as its caliph. By declaring a caliphate, al-Baghdadi was demanding the allegiance of all devout Muslims according to Islamic jurisprudence—fiqh. ISIS has also stated: "The legality of all emirates, groups, states and organizations becomes null by the expansion of the khilafah's [caliphate's] authority and arrival of its troops to their areas." ISIS thus rejects the political divisions established by Western powers at the end of World War I in the Sykes–Picot Agreement as it absorbs territory in Syria and Iraq.

Territorial claims

On 13 October 2006, the group announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq, which claimed authority over the Iraqi governorates of Baghdad, Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, Nineveh and parts of Babil. Following the 2013 expansion of the group into Syria and the announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the number of wilayah—provinces—which it claimed increased to 16. In addition to the seven Iraqi wilayah, the Syrian divisions, largely lying along existing provincial boundaries, are Al Barakah, Al Kheir, Ar-Raqqah, Al Badiya, Halab, Idlib, Hama, Damascus and the Coast. After taking control of both sides of the border in mid-2014, ISIS created a new province incorporating both Syrian territory around Abu Kamal and Iraqi territory around Qaim. This new wilayah was designated al-Furat. In Syria, ISIS's seat of power is in Ar-Raqqah Governorate. Top ISIS leaders, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, are known to have visited its provincial capital, Ar-Raqqah.

Governance

British security expert Frank Gardner concluded that the group's prospects of maintaining control and rule were greater in 2014 than they had been in 2006. Despite being as brutal as before, ISIS has become "well entrenched" among the population and is not likely to be dislodged by ineffective Syrian or Iraqi forces. It has replaced corrupt governance with functioning locally-controlled authorities. Services have been restored and there are adequate supplies of water and oil. With Western-backed intervention being unlikely, the group will "continue to hold their ground" and rule an area "the size of Pennsylvania for the foreseeable future", he said.

Ar-Raqqah in Syria is the de facto capital of the Islamic State. It is said to be a "test case" or "show case" of ISIS governance. As of September 2014, governance in Ar-Raqqah is under the total control of ISIS, where it has rebuilt the structure of modern government in less than a year. Former government workers from the Assad regime maintain their jobs after pledging allegiance to ISIS. Institutions, restored and restructured, are providing services. The Ar-Raqqah dam continues to provide electricity and water. Foreign expertise supplements Syrian officials in running civilian institutions. Only the police and soldiers are ISIS fighters, who receive confiscated lodging previously owned by non-Sunnis and others who fled. Welfare services are provided, price controls established, and taxes imposed on the wealthy. Exporting oil from oilfields that it has captured brings in tens of millions of dollars. ISIS runs a soft power program in the areas under its control in Iraq and Syria, which includes social services, religious lectures and da'wah—proselytizing—to local populations. It also performs public services such as repairing roads and maintaining the electricity supply.

Analysis

After significant setbacks for the group during the latter stages of the coalition forces' presence in Iraq, by late 2012 it was thought to have renewed its strength and more than doubled the number of its members to about 2,500, and since its formation in April 2013, ISIS grew rapidly in strength and influence in Iraq and Syria. In June 2014, The Economist reported that "ISIS may have up to 6,000 fighters in Iraq and 3,000–5,000 in Syria, including perhaps 3,000 foreigners; nearly a thousand are reported to hail from Chechnya and perhaps 500 or so more from France, Britain and elsewhere in Europe". Chechen fighter Abu Omar al-Shishani, for example, was made commander of the northern sector of ISIS in Syria in 2013.

Analysts have underlined the deliberate inflammation of sectarian conflict between Iraqi Shias and Sunnis during the Iraq War by various Sunni and Shia players as the root cause of ISIS's rise. The post-invasion policies of the international coalition forces have also been cited as a factor, with Fanar Haddad, a research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute, blaming the coalition forces during the Iraq War for "enshrining identity politics as the key marker of Iraqi politics".

By 2014, ISIS was increasingly being viewed as a militia rather than a terrorist group by some organizations. As major Iraqi cities fell to al-Baghdadi's cohorts in June, Jessica Lewis, a former US army intelligence officer at the Institute for the Study of War, described ISIS as "not a terrorism problem anymore", but rather "an army on the move in Iraq and Syria, and they are taking terrain. They have shadow governments in and around Baghdad, and they have an aspirational goal to govern. I don't know whether they want to control Baghdad, or if they want to destroy the functions of the Iraqi state, but either way the outcome will be disastrous for Iraq." Lewis has called ISIS "an advanced military leadership". She said, "They have incredible command and control and they have a sophisticated reporting mechanism from the field that can relay tactics and directives up and down the line. They are well-financed, and they have big sources of manpower, not just the foreign fighters, but also prisoner escapees."

According to the Institute for the Study of War, ISIS's 2013 annual report reveals a metrics-driven military command, which is "a strong indication of a unified, coherent leadership structure that commands from the top down". Middle East Forum's Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi said, "They are highly skilled in urban guerrilla warfare while the new Iraqi Army simply lacks tactical competence." Seasoned observers point to systemic corruption within the Iraq Army, it being little more than a system of patronage, and have attributed to this its spectacular collapse as ISIS and its allies took over large swaths of Iraq in June 2014.

While officials fear ISIS may either inspire attacks in the United States by sympathizers or those returning after joining ISIS, American intelligence agencies find there is no immediate threat or specific plots. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel sees an "imminent threat to every interest we have." Daniel Benjamin, former top counterterrorism adviser, derides such alarmist talk as a "farce" that panics the public.