



TONY BLAIR  
INSTITUTE  
FOR GLOBAL  
CHANGE

# Diving Deep into the Origins of ISIS

CO-EXISTENCE

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A new report from Brookings provides a historical analytical profile of ISIS, looking deep into its origins, its objectives, and how the threat can be confronted.

On the 1 December 2014 the [Brookings Doha Center](http://www.brookings.edu/about/centers/doha) (<http://www.brookings.edu/about/centers/doha>) published a substantial new report authored by Charles Lister, [Profiling the Islamic State](http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2014/12/profiling-islamic-state-lister) (<http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2014/12/profiling-islamic-state-lister>), examining ISIS' history, its predecessors and its evolution. Lister points to the intense turmoil that has grown in Syria and Iraq in recent years, noting that this has created socio-political vacuums where jihadi groups have been able to thrive, and in particular highlights the roots of ISIS in Jordan and Afghanistan, dating back to 1999.

In terms of military capacity, ISIS now has as many as 31,000 fighters, has become a versatile organisation and has exploited local dynamics, ultimately enabling them to defeat national armies and rival insurgent factions. Lister also says they have also become a bureaucratic and wealthy organisation, earning around \$2 million per day by September 2014.

In one of the key points of the report, Lister says that ISIS should be viewed as a more advanced threat than a simple terrorist organisation, with its specific objective to establish and maintain a self-sufficient Islamic state, and that the key to undermining the groups long-term sustainability is to find a solution to [socio-economic](http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/data#!/map/gdp-per-capita/IRQ) (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/data#!/map/gdp-per-capita/IRQ>) failures within its areas of operation.

The report also identifies a [Who's Who](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling%20islamic%20state%20lister/en_whos_who.pdf) ([http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling%20islamic%20state%20lister/en\\_whos\\_who.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling%20islamic%20state%20lister/en_whos_who.pdf)) of ISIS leadership, from the 'Caliph Ibrahim' - Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, through the military chiefs, spokesmen, ministers, governors, commanders and officials.

Five policies should be adopted to deal with ISIS, including destroying its financial strength.

In conclusion, the report addresses five areas necessary to defeating ISIS, which should be adopted at local, regional and international levels: **1)** countering ISIS's financial strength and ability to fund the provision of governance and social services to civilians; **2)** neutralising ISIS's capacity for military mobility and the rapid re-deployment of manpower; **3)** collecting and acting on intelligence relating to ISIS's senior leadership and military command and control structure; **4)** weakening and delegitimising ISIS's effective use of social media for recruitment and information operations; **5)** seeking to stabilise the existing conflict dynamics in both Syria and Iraq.

The key points from the report are featured below:

## KEY POINTS: 15 YEARS OF EVOLUTION

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ISIS has deep roots dating back to at least 1999, when its father figure, Ahmad Fadl al-Nazal al-Khalayleh (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi) was released from prison in Jordan.

#### **1999-2003: From Jordan to Afghanistan**

- Zarqawi was released from Jordan's al-Sawwaqa prison after serving 5 years of a 15-year sentence for weapons possession and being a member of the Bayat al-Imam—a militant organisation. Zarqawi then moved to Afghanistan, where he made contact with al-Qaeda's leadership and established his own jihadi group, Jund al-Sham, which he renamed within months to Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTWJ).
- JTWJ quickly attracted international attention for its plot to attack Amman's Radisson Hotel and at least two other popular tourist sites in December 1999. Zarqawi's JTWJ fought alongside al-Qaeda and Taliban forces before eventually fleeing to Iran in December 2001.

#### **2003-2004: Initiating Iraq's Insurgency**

- By the time U.S. forces invaded Iraq in March 2003, Zarqawi had established a small JTWJ base in Biyara in the Kurdish province of

Sulaymaniya—which was targeted in the initial U.S.-led air campaign in March.

- JTWJ targeted coalition forces, but had three other principal targets: Zaraqawi's traditional enemy of Jordan, the international community, and the Shia, which Zaraqawi viewed as the chief threat to Sunni power in Iraq and the wider region. Zaraqawi believed his organisation could take advantage of the resulting chaos to cast itself as the defender of the Sunni community and to usher in the establishment of an Islamic state.
- Zaraqawi's writings were consistently riddled with anti-Shia rhetoric harking back to the words of historical Islamic ideologues. His final public address before his death on 7 June 2006, Zaraqawi exclaimed, "The Muslims will have no victory or superiority over the aggressive infidels such as the Jews and the Christians until there is a total annihilation of those under them, such as the apostate agents headed by the *rafida* [Shia]."

#### **2004-2006: Iraq Consolidation, al-Qaeda Tensions**

- Due to its prominence and extensive international recruitment networks, JTWJ increasingly represented the centre of a growing jihadi umbrella in Iraq, incorporating other similarly minded groups. In September 2004, after eight months of negotiations, Zaraqawi pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. From that point onwards, JTWJ was known as *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*, often simplified to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).
- On 15 January 2006, AQI announced its merger with five other groups (Jaysh al-Ta'ifa al-Mansura, Saraya 'Ansar al-Tawhid, Saraya al-Jihad al-Islami, Saraya al-Ghuraba and Kataib al-Ahwal) to form Majlis Shura al-Mujahideenn (MSM), a coalition whose aim was to unite and better coordinate Iraq's jihadi insurgency.
- Zaraqawi's death on 7 June 2006 catalysed a strengthening of the organisation. Within five days, AQI appointed Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (Abu Ayyub al-Masri) as its new leader, and four months later the MSM announced the establishment of *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq*, or the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), with a fully structured cabinet. Then, on 10 November, Masri pledged *bayah* (allegiance) to ISI leader Hamid Dawud

Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi (Abu Omar al-Baghdadi).

### **2007-2009: Governance Failure & the Sahwa**

- The establishment of ISI was intended to represent a qualitative evolution whereby an insurgent group transformed into a military-political actor responsible for governing territory. But by early 2007, locally formed tribal *Sahwa* (Awakening) councils had begun actively combating ISI territorial control in Sunni areas of Iraq. Backed by U.S. and local security forces, these *Sahwa* militias—with their extensive local knowledge—proved effective at counterinsurgency.
- This shift in dynamics encouraged ISI to lash out against rival Sunni insurgent groups and minority communities, including on 14 August 2007 when four ISI car bomb attacks against Yazidi (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/glance/how-isis-justifies-genocide>) villages in northern Iraq killed nearly 800 people.
- By 2008, ISI was under extreme pressure in Iraq. Many of its foreign fighters left the country and sectarian violence decreased measurably.

### **2009-2011: Restructuring & Recovery**

- While pressure on ISI continued through 2011, *Sahwa* efforts were weakened by the initiation of U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq from June 2009 to August 2010.
- One particularly significant decision was to shift ISI's headquarters to the northern city of Mosul, where existing Arab-Kurdish tensions could be exploited. Initially, everyday ISI management in Mosul was led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi's deputy, Abu Qaswarah al-Maghribi. Following his death in October 2008, Maghribi was likely succeeded by Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani, the current leader of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.
- Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed along with AQL leader Abu Ayyub al-Masri on 18 April 2010. His replacement as ISI leader was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

- By mid-2010, ISI was offering larger salaries than the government and recruiting *Sahwa* members, and in early 2010 ISI also sought to rebuild its senior leadership after many of its senior officials had been killed or captured.
- ISI also adopted a strategic shift, initiating an information campaign aimed at re-emphasising the legitimacy of their Islamic state project. The group escalated attacks in the second half on 2009, notably killing almost 400 people in central Baghdad in one significant attack.

### **2011- mid-2014: Syria, Iraq, al-Qaeda, & a Caliphate**

- In early 2011, with the Arab Spring in full flow, ISI continued the process of expansion and significantly escalated its military operations in Iraq, both geographically, incorporating southern Shia areas and the Kurdish north. The September 2012 attack on Tikrit's Tasfirat Prison liberated 47 senior ISI leaders from death row. The campaign's finale was an assault on Abu Ghraib prison on 21 July 2013 that enabled approximately 500 prisoners to escape.
- The last three years have been extremely consequential for ISI's dramatic evolution and growth into an organisation capable of conquering and governing territory. Most significantly, ISI has expanded into Syria, exploiting that country's revolution and civil war. In the following six months of 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra operated similarly to ISI, but insisted it had no links to ISI or al-Qaeda, but by mid-January 2013 the group had led the seizure of two major military facilities in Northern Syria.
- On April 9, 2013, Baghdadi confirmed in an audio statement that Jabhat al-Nusra was an offshoot of ISI and that henceforth, it would be subsumed into the expanded Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). In February 2014 Zawahiri announced that "ISIS is not a branch of the al-Qaeda group, we have no organisational relationship with it, and the group is not responsible for its actions."
- Having consolidated its capital in Raqqa, ISIS forces in Iraq exploited conditions in the Sunni heartland of Anbar to march into Fallujah and parts of Ramadi in January 2014. This marked ISIS's renewed venture into overt territorial control in Iraq and



set the stage for its gradual expansion in Anbar, particularly along the Syrian border.

- ISIS issued a series of coordinated media releases marking the start of Ramadan. The most significant of these was an audio recording, released on June 29 in five languages, that announced the establishment of the caliphate.

## ISIS TODAY

### Military Strategy

- ISIS should not be thought of as merely a terrorist group, but in fact a qualitative evolution of the al-Qaeda model.
- By mid-October 2014 ISIS likely commanded as many as 31,000 fighters, but more importantly had accumulated considerable territorial control.
- While U.S.-led airstrikes in Iraq and then Syria have contained IS and slowed its momentum, a considerable portion of ISIS weaponry remains in play or in concealed storage, despite being targeted.
- After a series of interviews, new recruits to ISIS have to undergo several weeks of religious and military training. ISIS military operations can generally be divided into two categories. The first is mass casualty urban attacks, normally targeting Shia, Alawi Muslims, and other minority groups, often in civilian areas. This central facet of ISIS's military strategy aims to spark or sustain sectarian conflict—to "provoke [the Shia] to radicalise, join Iranian-sponsored militias and commit similar atrocities against Sunnis."
- The other category of ISIS's military strategy can be described as a concerted campaign of attrition against military opponents' capabilities and morale. In Iraq, such operations have focused primarily on Sunni urban centres and transport routes within primarily Sunni regions, particularly Anbar and Ninawa provinces. In Syria this has centered on resource-rich regions in the northeast and east of the country, as well as areas bordering Turkey and Iraq, but has mainly targeted opposition groups.
- Despite widespread accusations that ISIS and the Syrian government have consciously coordinated operations, there has been no genuine evidence to substantiate this.
- IS's pragmatic balancing of interests shifted in July 2014 when, having consolidated control in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, it launched several major offensives against government forces in Aleppo, Homs, al-Hasakah, and Raqqa.

### Internal Policy

- ISIS's top-level leadership structure ([http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling%20islamic%20state%20lister/en\\_whos\\_who.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling%20islamic%20state%20lister/en_whos_who.pdf)) has become smaller and more exclusive since Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's accession in 2010. Baghdadi likely maintains a personal advisor or assistant (formerly Haji Bakr), and below him two immediate deputies (one for Syria, one for Iraq), an eight-man cabinet, and a military council of at most 13 men.
- More significant, however, is the military and intelligence experience held by many of Baghdadi's deputies, which has brought a level of professionalism to ISIS's ability to operate as an efficient and capable organisation. For example, both of Baghdadi's deputies were former high ranking officers in the Iraqi military.
- According to data seized from the safe-house of former ISIS General Military Council leader Adnan Ismail Najem Bilawi (Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi) in early June 2014, the group maintained roughly 1,000 "medium and top level field commanders, who all have technical, military, and security experience."
- ISIS has been almost entirely self-financed since at least 2005 and according to the U.S. Department of Defense database, external funding to AQI, MSM, and ISI between 2005 and 2010 amounted to no more than five percent of its total income.

### **Communications Strategy**

- Another important facet of ISIS's internal operations is its effective use of social media and exploitation of international media attention. For example a video released by ISIS' Al-Furqan Media on 17 March 2014 was watched by over 56,000 YouTube users within 24 hours.
- An increased focus on English-language production since April-May 2014 indicated a shift toward promoting the idea of living within its new "Islamic State" at a more international level. The new *Dabiq* magazine—slickly designed and published in English—has incorporated subtle mechanisms to broaden ISIS's recruitment base.

- Operating a coordinated network of inter-linked social media accounts has also allowed ISIS to maintain consistent messaging in multiple languages. In particular, the group's bitter battle with al-Qaeda was played out online.

### **Governance**

- By declaring a state and announcing the restoration of the caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made ISIS' ability to rule and govern the determinant of success. Thus far ISIS does control territory, including multiple urban centers, and its religio-political project has managed not only to sustain governance, but to expand it.
- In Iraq, the group has benefited from being able to exploit widespread Sunni discontent with Shia-led governments perceived as repressing Sunni rights.
- The implementation of a strict form of sharia law is central to ISIS' governance. This includes imposing the *hudud* (fixed Islamic punishments for serious crimes); enforcing attendance of the five daily prayers; banning drugs, alcohol, and tobacco; controlling personal appearance, forbidding gambling, non-Islamic music, and gender mixing; and ordering the destruction of religious shrines, among other rules.
- The imposition of the dhimmi pact upon monotheistic non-Muslims has appeared between February and July 2014, which placed non-Muslims within a relationship of "protection" under ISIS, so long as they regularly pay *jizya* (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/wearen>) (poll tax) and abide by several other strict regulations.
- Religious education and proselytising is another key element of ISIS' religio-political governance. In addition to introducing new academic curriculums, public *da'wa* (proselytising) events are frequently held, allowing the organisation to "educate" their constituents on the benefits of living under ISIS rule.
- ISIS has devised a near-complete mode of governance, which, when combined with the organisation's extensive financial resources, has largely kept cities running and people tacitly content.

## OUTLOOK

While ISIS's fundamental structure will always be that of a terrorist organisation, its expansion and objectives are more advanced than that, with an effective proto-state being built and defended across Syria and Iraq.

The organisation's five-step process—*hijra* (migration), *jama'a* (congregate), destabilising *taghut* (tyrants), *tamkin* (consolidation), and *khilafa* (caliphate)—has now been completed. ISIS's ability to sustain military momentum will prove key to its future success and recruiting.

### Objectives: Iraq and Syria

- In Iraq, ISIS will likely seek to continue destabilising social dynamics and to enforce a perception within the Sunni community that Haider al-Abadi's new government does not defend their rights. Militarily, ISIS will seek to consolidate its authority in Mosul but without antagonising other politically-minded factions. It is likely that ISIS will gradually expand its bombings and other attacks across Baghdad and seek to spark a sectarian tit-for-tat dynamic with Shia militias, in order to neutralise any attempt at Sunni-Shia reconciliation within the central government.
- In Syria, ISIS will seek to consolidate its control in the capital of Raqqa and in the rest of the governorate. Despite international strikes, ISIS will also seek to maintain momentum in its offensive operations in western Aleppo, particularly around the Kurdish border town of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab) and towards the opposition-controlled Bab al-Salameh border crossing with Turkey.

### Regional or International Objectives?

- The group does not yet appear to be in a rush to expand its operations. The group has a minimal presence in Lebanon and in Jordan it maintains a small support base in places such as the southern city of Ma'an. Recent estimates suggested that half of

the approximately 2,000 Jordanians fighting in Syria and Iraq were IS members.

- Saudi Arabia has over 1,000 nationals fighting in Syria alone (mostly for ISIS) and almost certainly has an appreciable ISIS support base at home.
- Turkey has been widely blamed for the ease with which foreign fighters have been able to cross its border into Syria, but their main concern is that the large refugee population (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/data#!/map/refugees:-country-of-asylum/TUR>) in the south could be used to establish a militant presence.
- In North Africa, there is apparently a minimal pro-ISIS presence in the Libyan (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/country-profiles/libya>) town of Derna.
- The splinter faction of Pakistan (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/country-profiles/pakistan>)'s Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan known as Jamaat-e-Ansar announced its support for ISIS, but remained at least officially loyal to al-Qaeda.
- In the Philippines (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/country-profiles/philippines>), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and a splinter faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group led by Isnilon Hapilon both announced their allegiance to ISIS.
- In Indonesia (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/country-profiles/indonesia>), the imprisoned former Jemaah Islamiyya leader Abu Bakar Ba'asyir pledged his allegiance to ISIS after allegedly facilitating the transfer of finances to the organisation.

### **Foreign Fighter Blowback?**

- The issue of "blowback"—or citizens returning to their home countries to carry out terrorist attacks—has generated a great deal of attention. Recent statistical studies show there are likely to be at least 15,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq from at least 90 different countries.
- Looking at data from 1990-2010, approximately 11 percent of foreign fighters have become active security threats after

returning home.

- Rising concerns have led European countries to intensify domestic security measures in 2014. Authorities in the United Kingdom, for example, carried out at least 500% more Syria-related terrorism arrests in 2014 compared to 2013, and on 29 August the British government raised the domestic terror threat level to its second highest.

The report can be read in full [here](#)

([http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling%20islamic%20state%20lister/en\\_web\\_lister.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling%20islamic%20state%20lister/en_web_lister.pdf)).





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