ISIS Administrative and Territorial Organization

Jennifer Jefferis, Ph.D.
Near East and South Asia Centre for Strategic Studies, Washington

The structure of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is very much a product of the organization's ideological evolution and a reflection of its intended future. It is at once an organization seeking to remake the global order and one that operates quite similarly to states in the system it is trying to replace. This makes it an organization with significant vulnerabilities that will multiply as it faces continued pressure from more well-established states.

To best understand the structure of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, there are three interrelated questions that must be answered:

— Where did it come from?
— How does it function?
— How is it funded?

We'll look at each in turn.

Where Did It Come From?

Origins and Roots

Long before ISIS was a global household acronym, al-Qaeda was the world's most famous terrorist organization. Following the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, al-Qaeda's leadership struggled to determine how best to fit the fight against the American occupation in Iraq into their other global efforts. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, founder of Tawhid wal-Jihad (Monotheism and Holy War – a terrorist organization responsible for 42% of the suicide bombings in Iraq

between 2003 and 2005) offered a grisly path forward. Zarqawi tried to convince Osama Bin Laden, and other al-Qaeda leaders, that the best strategy in Iraq was to target the Shia population, knowing that to do so would inspire a sectarian civil war. Eventually Zarqawi promised loyalty to Bin Laden, and renamed Tawhid wal Jihad "al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers," or as it is more familiarly known al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

When Zarqawi was killed in 2006, he was replaced by a man named Abu Ayyub al-Masri. Four months after Zarqawi's death, al-Masri announced the merge of AQI with a broader network of Sunni fighting groups. He called the new entity the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Under al-Masri's guidance, ISI developed a series of administrative departments that, in many ways, paralleled the ministries of a state. Moreover, ISI divided Baghdad into six smaller sub-divisions of influence. Each was governed by a local emir.

As al-Masri and other ISI leaders systematically constructed the governing infrastructure of ISI, others were developing its ideological principles and staffing its ranks. Interestingly, the latter efforts were inadvertently aided by the presence of one of the largest US-run prisons in Iraq, a place many fighters had occasion to pass through. It was in Camp Bucca that Ibrahim Awwad al Badari, or as he is more famously known – Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, met and recruited many future fighters for the caliphate he would declare eight years later. While he wasn't an official member of the organization's leadership at this time, he demonstrated an ideological depth that drew the attention of new recruits and existing leaders alike.

Al-Baghdadi Ascends

In 2007, al-Baghdadi was invited to join the Shura Council of ISI, and three years later, when al-Masri

and the other head of the organization were killed, al-Baghdadi was elected to assume the mantle of leadership. Al-Baghdadi was faced with the challenging task, at that moment in history, of leading ISI. In 2010, American General Odierno noted in a Pentagon news briefing that American forces had demolished the leadership of al-Qaeda in Iraq when they "either picked up or killed 34 out of the top 42 al-Qaeda in Iraq leaders." He went on to say "they're clearly now attempting to reorganize themselves. They're struggling a little bit… they've lost connection with al-Qaeda's senior leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan."[1] Thus the ISI that al-Baghdadi now commanded was reeling from a near dismantlement of its entire leadership structure. The result was that al-Baghdadi was free to divest ISI (and under its umbrella, AQI) even more fully from Bin Laden's al-Qaeda.

In Camp Bucca Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, met and recruited many future fighters for the caliphate he would declare eight years later

Al-Baghdadi did this by emphasizing the development of the 'state' apparatus even more than al-Masri had, and employed a large number of former members of Saddam Hussein's military and intelligence forces to advance that development. These individuals were entirely willing to pursue the destruction of the new Iraqi government under Nouri Al Maliki. In 2012 and 2013, ISI and AQI oversaw a series of attacks with renewed intensity. The Iraqi government responded with extensive force, but was unable to quell the efforts of the groups. On January 1, 2014, the rebels took control of Fallujah and announced that they were an Islamic Emirate and would defend Sunnis from the al-Maliki government.[2]

Movement in Syria

But al-Baghdadi's vision did not end in Iraq. In fact, shortly after protests began to spread through Syr-

ia, al-Baghdadi sent a small number of ISI-affiliated operatives into Syria where they initiated a series of car bombings in Damascus. In January of 2012, the group Jabhat al-Nusra announced its presence in Aleppo, where it was assumed to be a domestically grown group. In fact, it was run by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, who had fought with ISI in Iraq. Al-Zawahiri indirectly bestowed al-Qaeda's blessing on al-Nusra by publishing an appeal to Muslims everywhere to support the efforts of the movement against the regime in Syria. In December of 2012, the United States Treasury Department designated al-Nusra as the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda.

The insistence on establishing an elaborate state-like bureaucracy reflects a determination to go beyond the previous models toward creating a caliphate

In April 2013, al-Baghdadi issued a statement in which he explicitly connected al-Nusra, al-Qaeda and ISI, and essentially claimed leadership over all three, saying "the Islamic State of Iraq and Jabhat al Nusra were hereby void… and the Islamic State of Iraq was retitled the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham."[3] Moreover, he declared that the new State would operate under the banner of the caliphate.

Broken Alliance

Al Jolani, and al-Qaeda vehemently disagreed: al Jolani by physically trying to repel the fighters al-Baghdadi pushed into Syria; and Zawahiri by issuing an edict that banned al-Baghdadi from operating in Syria. Al-Baghdadi responded in kind to both. He continued to advance fighters into Syria – and even succeeded in drawing a huge number of al-Nusra fighters to his new banner. He also responded to Zawahiri by insisting that no one had the right to stop the advancement of the Islamic State. The

[1] WEISS, Michael and Hassan HASSAN. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror.* New York: Regan Arts, 2015. p. 78

[2] *Ibid* 98.

[3] BUNZEL, Cole. "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State." *Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World.* 19: 1-42, p. 25, 2015

debate raged on for several months, until Zawahiri officially disassociated al-Qaeda from al-Baghdadi's ISIS.

The ISIS narrative is quick to highlight the moral foundation of its court system in contrast to the corrupt systems it is replacing

The governing structure that has come to characterize ISIS owes much to the distinct organizations that al-Baghdadi claims to have subsumed. Its emphasis on internally-generated funding is consistent with how ISI operated, while its marketing to foreign audiences and integration of foreign fighters draws from the experiences of al-Qaeda. At the same time, the insistence on establishing an elaborate state-like bureaucracy reflects a determination to go beyond both of the previous models, moving away from liberating a population, toward creating a caliphate.

How Does It Function?

ISIS, more than any other organization in Iraq or Syria, has deftly navigated the social politics of its environment, and leveraged these to its advantage in impressive ways. In Iraq, it had the foresight to co-opt much of the former Baathist Iraqi military to strengthen its own organization, and in Syria, it played on the relationships between local tribes to advance its position against al-Nusra and the Syrian regime. In addition to using locals to swell its ranks, ISIS has also demonstrated its capacity to integrate tens of thousands of foreign fighters from all around the world. Functionally, ISIS operates as a semi-federated entity. It has an influential central command with ministries mimicking those that would be found in any other state, including education, public services, health, security, public relations and agriculture, among others. These ministries are replicated at regional levels, where local leaders maintain a degree of governing autonomy.

When ISIS takes control of new territory, it introduces itself to the local population through a series of outreach events. It hands out religious pamphlets, delivers sermons, and hosts small group-study sessions in an effort to acclimate local populations to its interpretation of Islam. To ensure that it is this interpretation that carries the day, the central government maintains authority over the religious police, an entity designed to "promote virtue and prevent vice to dry up sources of evil, prevent the manifestation of disobedience and urge Muslims toward well-being."[4] The organization is very methodical in its approach to enforcing morality. There are numerous headquarters of this religious police (there are 10 in Aleppo alone), and local religious police are responsible for sending a weekly violations report to their respective central location, where a careful record is maintained.

Mostly internally generated, ISIS has established an elaborate taxation programme for those living inside its conquered territories

ISIS also quickly establishes an Islamic court system in the territories it governs. The ISIS narrative is quick to highlight the moral foundation of its court system in contrast to the corrupt systems it is replacing. In many towns that have been ravaged by years of civil war, the ISIS model of law enforcement and justice, however harsh, is considered a positive contrast from the lawlessness that pervaded the war.

How Is It Funded?

Another element that sets ISIS apart from other terrorist organizations is the source and structure of its funding, which, again owing to its self-described statehood, is mostly internally generated. Rather than relying on donors and becoming beholden to their interests or limitations, ISIS has established an elaborate taxation programme for those living inside its conquered territories, including taxes on fuel, vehicles, school fees, cash withdrawals and agriculture.

4 CARIS, Charles C. and Samuel REYNOLDS. "ISIS Governance in Syria." *Middle East Security Report*. 22. p 4, 2014. www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS_Governance.pdf

In April 2015, ISIS held approximately 138,000 square kilometres of territory, which before the war began, was populated by approximately 8 million people. Even though 2016 estimates indicate that it has lost 40% of this territory in Iraq and 20% in Syria, it still generates an impressive, if declining, internal revenue. The US Treasury estimates that ISIS generates hundreds of millions of dollars per year in taxes alone.

Moreover, ISIS has developed a war strategy that includes trying to take control of key oil assets. Before the coalition bombing efforts began, analysts believed ISIS drew in around $500 million through these assets. The amount would be higher if the organization had the requisite skills necessary to run these facilities at full operating power. ISIS is aware of their own inadequacy in this area and offers high salaries to experts in the field willing to work in its territory.[5]

A Faltering Trajectory

ISIS's administrative and territorial structure leaves it vulnerable to a variety of potential challenges. In the first place, by establishing systems of taxation on local populations, it is entering into a social contract with those populations, at least in form. Taxed populations have expectations of public services rendered, and while ISIS has demonstrated skill in developing religious and justice institutions, it has not gone significantly further. At the same time, the coalition efforts have deliberately targeted its other primary source of funding by going after ISIS-controlled oil assets. As the territory ISIS controls shrinks, and its access to oil grows increasingly limited, its ability to make good on the promises implied in a social contract will deplete more and more. This is likely to drive populations that may have tolerated its presence in the past to actively challenge it in the future.

> As the territory ISIS controls shrinks, and its access to oil grows increasingly limited, its ability to make good on the promises implied in a social contract will deplete more and more

ISIS's control of territory and implementation of its strict form of Sharia is dependent on a vast network of religious and military police networks. The opportunities for corruption in a bureaucracy of this size are significant, but as ISIS continues to lose territory and stability, its ability to provide sufficient financial compensation to ward off this temptation (much less to have sufficient strength to monitor it) will also decline. The result could be that the organization will lose one of the few characteristics that endear it to local populations.

ISIS engages in terrorism, but is organized like a state. This combination may yet be what destroys it, as its gruesome practices leave it few state allies, while its cumbersome bureaucracy limits its ability to adapt and evolve in the face of international pressure.

---

[5] HANSEN-LEWIS, Jamie and Jacob N. SHAPIRO. "Understanding the Daesh Economy." *Perspectives on Terrorism*. 9:4, 2015.