



THE THREAT OF THE NEW CALIPHATE

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) declared the areas that it captured in Iraq and Syria to be an Islamic state, or caliphate. To mark its declaration, the group shortened its name to the Islamic State and proclaimed its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State and the Caliph for Muslims everywhere. Muslim scholars and movements from across the Sunni Islamic spectrum have rejected the caliphate declared by the Islamic State since its claim to the caliphate could pose a “threat” to Al-Qaeda and significantly impact the international jihadist movement as there would now be “two competing international jihadist representatives, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State”.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

The Threat of the New Caliphate

Dr .Shaul Shay (August 2014)

The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) is a jihadist group operating in Iraq and Syria¹ that was formed in April 2013 as an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). It has since been disavowed by Al-Qaeda but has become one of the main jihadist groups fighting government forces in Syria and Iraq.²

The ISIS declared the areas that it captured in Iraq and Syria to be an **Islamic state**, or **caliphate**.³ To mark its declaration, the group shortened its name to the **Islamic State** and proclaimed its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State and the Caliph for Muslims everywhere.

Islamists have long dreamed of recreating the caliphate that ruled over the Middle East, much of North Africa and beyond in various forms over the course of Islam's 1,400-year history. The caliphate was abolished by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the first president of Turkey, in 1924. Since then, efforts have been made to revive the caliphate but they have collapsed because of political infighting among Muslim leaders.⁴

Muslim scholars and movements from across the Sunni Islamic spectrum have rejected the caliphate declared by the Islamic State, which received scathing criticism from both mainstream religious leaders and those associated with Al-Qaeda.

¹ The final "S" in the acronym ISIS stems from the Arabic word "al-Sham". This can mean the Levant, Syria or even Damascus but in the context of the global jihad it refers to the Levant.

² Profile: Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), BBC News, June 16, 2014.

³ In Arabic, the word caliph means "successor" to Muhammad. A caliph was the Islamic state's supreme religious and political leader. The caliph was often referred to as the Amir al-Mu'minin, or "Commander of the Believers." Caliphate means "government under a caliph." The caliphate was the Islamic state established after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, in the seventh century.

⁴ Explainer: What Is The Islamic Caliphate? Radio Free Europe, July 13, 2014.

The long-term goal of the Islamic State is the unification of the Muslim world under its flag. This disciplined, experienced and well-financed fighting group has gained a reputation for [brutal rule](#) in the areas under its control.

The Declaration of the Caliphate

A statement released online by the Islamic State stated that “...it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the Khalifah Ibrahim and support him. The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the caliphate's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas.”

Followers of the group's proclaimed "Caliph Ibrahim ibn Awwad", or [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) as he was known until the [announcement](#), are inspired by the Rashidun caliphate, the first four Caliphs of Islam that reigned from 632-661 AD and succeeded the Prophet Muhammad. The Rashidun caliphate, unlike the Islamic State, is considered legitimate by a large number of Muslims but that has not prevented the group's call for all Muslims to unite under its banner.⁵

The [group's declaration](#) is steeped in references to verses from the Quran, oral traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, and quotes from classical scholars in a clear attempt to bolster the legitimacy of al-Baghdadi's claim to be the leader of all Muslims.⁶

Al-Baghdadi's purported descent from the Prophet's grandson is also mentioned in an effort to comply with the requirement that a caliph be a member of the Prophet's Quraish tribe.

In addition to its theological grounds for legitimacy, the Islamic State finds clear precedent in the historical conquests of the Rashidun caliphs - rapid military successes against a better-equipped enemy.

In the case of caliphs Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman, and Ali, poorly-armed Arab armies fought and defeated the Byzantine and Persian empires, bringing about the rapid collapse of the latter.

⁵ Shafik Mandhai, Baghdadi's vision of a new caliphate, Al Jazeera, July 1, 2014.

⁶ Ibid.

Groups like the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda believe that the lack of a caliphate has contributed to the humiliation they say Muslims have suffered in the last century.

According to the statement published by the Islamic State, Muslims "have not tasted honor" since the caliphate was lost and that it is "a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim".

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

The Islamic State is led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Little is known about him but it is believed that he was born in Samarra, north of Baghdad, in 1971 and that he joined the insurgency that erupted in Iraq soon after the 2003 US-led invasion. In 2010 he emerged as the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, one of the groups that later merged into the ISIS.

Al-Baghdadi is regarded as a battlefield commander and tactician, which analysts say makes the Islamic State more attractive to young jihadists than Al-Qaeda, which is led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Islamic theologian.

The ISIS order of battle

Its precise size is unclear but the group is thought to include more than 10,000 fighters, including many [foreign jihadists](#). The ISIS claims to have fighters from the UK, France, Germany and other European countries, as well as the US, the Arab world and the Caucasus. Reports suggested that the groups ranks may have grown after collaboration with militias connected to the old Baathist regime of fallen dictator Saddam Hussein.⁷

The ISIS is well-armed and boosted its arsenal after looting equipment from Mosul's main army bases. In every city that it overruns, the ISIS frees hundreds of prison inmates, some of whom may be like-minded militants.

Military achievements

The group has seen considerable military success. In March 2013 it took over the Syrian city of Raqqa - the first provincial capital to fall under rebel control.

⁷ Ishaan Tharoor, Who's who in the battle for Iraq , June 12, 2014.

In January 2014 it capitalized on growing tension between Iraq's Sunni minority and the Shia-led government by taking control of the predominantly Sunni city of Fallujah, in the western Anbar province. It also seized large sections of the provincial capital, Ramadi, and has a presence in a number of towns near the Turkish and Syrian borders.

The ISIS seized Mosul on June 10, 2014, and advanced from Mosul to take control of [Tikrit](#), the capital of Salah ad-Din Province and the birthplace of Iraq's former leader, Saddam Hussein, located roughly 80 miles north of Baghdad and the Baiji oil refinery.

The ISIS attacked Mosul with 150 vehicles armed with mounted crew-served weapons and between 500 and 800 troops. It is unclear if elements of this same force moved on to take Sharqat, Qaiyara, Baiji and Tikrit, or if separate forces already close to these locations simply moved in to take their respective targets in sequence.⁸ However, it was [the ISIS's conquest of Mosul in June 2014](#) that sent shockwaves around the world.

On July 3, 2014 the Iraqi army launched a counter attack to retake Tikrit but Iraqi government troops and allied Shia volunteer fighters were forced to retreat to a base 4 kilometers south after coming under heavy mortar shelling and sniper fire. This failure highlights the difficulties of Baghdad's struggle to recapture territory from ISIS fighters.⁹

The ISIS tactics that have achieved devastating success in Iraq continue to be employed on the Syrian front. Using small contingents of fighters, the ISIS has steadily advanced to key towns and terrain within Syria's oil-rich Deir ez-Zour Province, which borders Homs Province as well as Iraq. The ISIS has increasingly leveraged local rebel groups as force multipliers and capitalized on local submission in order to establish zones of control from which to advance to its primary targets.¹⁰

On July 17, 2014 ISIS fighters seized the Shaer gas field, east of the ancient site of Palmyra in the Syrian central province of Homs, killing 90 guards. The governor of Homs, Talal Barazi, confirmed the attack.¹¹

⁸ Ahmed Ali, Jessica D. Lewis, Kimberly Kagan, The ISIS Battle Plan, ISW, Jun 12, 2014.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jennifer Cafarella, [ISIS Advances in Deir ez-Zour](#), Institute for the Study of WAR, July 5, 2014.

¹¹ Islamic State fighters seize Syria gas field, Al Jazeera, July 18, 2014.

The financial resources of the ISIS

Initially, the group relied on donations from wealthy individuals in Gulf Arab states, particularly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which supported its fight against President Bashar al-Assad.

The fall of Mosul to the ISIS made it the most cash-rich militant group in the world. Before the capture of Mosul in June 2014, the ISIS had cash and assets worth about \$900m (£500m). Afterwards, this rose to around \$2bn (£1.18bn). The group reportedly took hundreds of millions of dollars from Mosul's branch of Iraq's central bank. Its financial windfall seems likely to continue if it maintains control of oil fields in northern Iraq.¹²

The ISIS is said to earn a significant amount of money from the oil fields that it controls in eastern Syria, reportedly selling some of the supply back to the Syrian government. It is also believed to have sold looted antiquities from historical sites.

Syrian jihadist groups

Unlike other rebel groups in Syria, the ISIS is viewed as working towards an Islamic emirate that straddles Syria and Iraq. Some armed groups in northeast Syria claimed allegiance to the ISIS, possibly out of fear or in hopes of financial gain, but many in Syria simply see the group as a pawn in a bigger game, a ploy that sectarian regimes are using to stay relevant and in power.¹³

Since the announcement of the Caliphate, some of the major rebel groups in Syria have rejected its call. The Islamic Front, a group fighting both the Islamic State and the Syrian government, describes it as void of [legitimacy, divisive](#), and damaging to its causes.

The Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's main affiliate in Syria, has been battling the Islamic State since an unsuccessful attempt by Baghdad to forcibly merge the groups last year. Hostility towards the ISIS grew steadily in Syria as it regularly attacked fellow rebels and abused civilian supporters of the Syrian opposition.

¹² Shafik Mandhai, Baghdadi's vision of a new caliphate, Al Jazeera, July 1, 2014.

¹³ Bassel Oudat, The ISIS threat, Al Ahram, July 10, 2014.

In January 2014 rebels from both Western-backed and Islamist groups launched an offensive against the ISIS, seeking to drive its predominantly foreign fighters out of Syria. Thousands of people are reported to have been killed in the infighting.

In videos detailing alleged atrocities committed by the Islamic State, the Al-Nusra Front reverses the historic symbolism of the Rashidun era used by its rivals to compare them with a sect that fought against the Rashidun caliph Ali. Using the word, "Khawarij", a reference to religious group that tried to assassinate several companions of the Prophet, the Al-Qaeda-linked fighters are directly challenging al-Baghdadi's claim to inherit the legacy of the Rashidun caliphate.

Sunni rebel groups in Iraq

The Sunni rebels in Iraq are composed of several groups, including former Saddam Hussein loyalists and Sunni tribes from Anbar Province. The rebels have one common goal: they want regime change and many of them are only fighting under the Islamic State banner as a flag of convenience. Sunni tribal leaders are aware of this so moves are being made by the tribes to unite the Sunni rebels.

Following the US military's withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011, and anti-government protests that have taken place in Iraq since 2011 as well as the harsh crackdown that followed, gave the country's Sunni armed groups a new reason for political action. There are well-known Sunni groups like the Islamic Army of Iraq and other less known ones such as Ansar al-Islam (Supporters of Islam), Jaish al-Mujadiheen (al-Mujhaideen Army), and Kata'ib Thawarat al-Ishreen (1920 Revolution Brigades).¹⁴

A unique group is "The Men of the Naqshbandi Order", which is loyal to Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, the most senior member of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's regime who is still at large. The group began its armed activities in July 2003 against US forces in Iraq, and launched itself as a group at the end of 2006 after the execution of Saddam. The group is active in Nineveh, Diyala, and Salaheddin provinces in Iraq. It claimed responsibility for many attacks against US forces in Iraq and vows not to fight against any other groups seeking to liberate Iraq. The group captured the town of Sulaiman Bek in Salaheddin Province for about two days in April 2013. This is after government forces

¹⁴ Mapping Iraq's fighting groups, Al Jazeera, June 27, 2014.

used force to crack down on Sunni protests in Hawija, a town west of Kirkuk, leaving dozens of protesters dead and triggering a wave of clashes with government of forces. The group's ideology is a mix of Islamic and pan-Arab nationalistic ideas.¹⁵

Ayman al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda

The Islamic State has been shunned by others who share its goal of establishing a caliphate, earning the rebuke of Al-Qaeda's core leadership, including Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Zawahiri has urged the ISIS to focus on Iraq and leave Syria to the Al-Nusra Front, but al-Baghdadi and his fighters openly defied the Al-Qaeda chief. Commanding all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the new caliph, they released a statement according to which "it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalifah Ibrahim and support him."

The Al-Qaeda leader reprimanded fighters loyal to al-Baghdadi for their brutal tactics and for fighting against rival rebel factions.

Abu Mohamed al-Maqdisi, who was [released from a Jordanian prison](#) in June 2014 after serving a sentence for recruiting volunteers to fight in Afghanistan, called fighters loyal to al-Baghdadi, "deviant". Al-Maqdisi, [lashed out at the Islamic State](#) for its brutal methods, asking "Is this caliphate a sanctuary for the vulnerable and a refuge for all Muslims, or a sword hanging over those Muslims who disagree with them?"¹⁶

Summary and conclusions

The Islamic State's declaration of a caliphate is an attempt to assert itself on other groups and to gain legitimacy and credibility following its huge territorial gains in Iraq and Syria. However, its demands for allegiance and its vision of returning to a 'purer' era has been greeted by many with [derision and rejection](#), and few in the Middle East are expected to accept the caliphate of the ISIS.¹⁷

¹⁵ Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia (JRTN), Mapping militant organizations Stanford University.

¹⁶ Shafic Mandahi, Muslim leaders reject Baghdadi's caliphate, Al Jazeera, July 7, 2014.

¹⁷ Explainer: What Is The Islamic Caliphate? Radio Free Europe, July 13, 2014.

The ISIS is challenging the current "Sykes - Picot" borders of the Middle East by offering a "genuine, authentic, and alternative Islamic political system". By proclaiming a caliphate, it seeks to strengthen and emphasize its desire to exercise political control over that territory contrary to the nation-state model upon which the international system currently functions.

The ISIS's claim to the caliphate could pose a "threat" to Al-Qaeda and significantly impact the international jihadist movement. Al-Qaeda, disowned the group after falling out with ISIS leadership in Syria. There would now be "two competing international jihadist representatives, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State".

Al-Qaeda has long carried the mantle of the international jihadist cause but the ISIS has accomplished in Syria and Iraq what Al-Qaeda never has – it has carved out and taken control of a large swath of territory in the Middle East.¹⁸

The ISIS's proclamation also poses a direct challenge to the Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, although it has supported similar organizations in the past, will certainly not take kindly to this proclamation as the king of Saudi Arabia has given himself the title, 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques [located in Mecca and Medina],' which is almost an alternative title to caliph.

Fighting the idea of the caliphate is equally important as military action. Defeating the Islamic State will require a solution that must encompass Iraq and Syria and require religious leaders to speak out against the group's credibility.¹⁹ The influential Islamic cleric, Yusef al-Qaradawi, said that the group's declaration of an Islamic caliphate violates shari'a.²⁰

The Islamic State is not a homogeneous group and the more victories that it achieves, the more groups will rally to its banner. While that might help militarily, sharp differences in ideology may not keep all the groups together in the long term.²¹

¹⁸ 'Islamic caliphate': Blessing or threat? Al Jazeera, July 1, 2014.

¹⁹ Imran Khan, Iraq: One month in and no way out? Al Jazeera, July 10, 2014.

²⁰ Qaradawi says 'jihadist caliphate' violates sharia, Al Arabiya News, July 5, 2014.

²¹ Imran Khan, ISIL: a united front in Iraq? Al Jazeera, June 12, 2014.

The Islamic State's success is more the result of the weakness of the Iraqi army and pro-Assad Syrian forces than its own military strength. The group rules huge swaths of Iraq's northwest and eastern parts of Syria without a real challenge but the its march to Baghdad has slowed. Meanwhile, the ISIS does not have the strength to challenge the more effective Iraqi army units defending Baghdad and other largely Shia areas. Analysts argue that the self-declared Islamic state has little chance of survival as a semi-state entity in the long term.