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**Understanding ISIS:
From Conception to Operations**

KABIR TANEJA

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kabir Taneja is an Associate Fellow with ORF's Strategic Studies programme. His primary research interest is India's relations with West Asia. He studies domestic political dynamics, terrorism, non-state militant actors, and the general security paradigm of the region. Kabir has previously held positions as a Researcher and Fellow with the Robert Bosch Stiftung (Germany), Fridtjof Nansen Institute (Norway), and Takshashila Institution (India). He holds a Bachelor's degree from La Trobe University, Melbourne, and a Master's degree from Cardiff University, United Kingdom. Kabir has written for various publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Hindu*, *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, *The Huffington Post*, *Politico*, *Quartz*, and *The Wire*.

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ABSTRACT

This paper bridges the gap in Indian public discourse on the aims of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Islamic State) and where it stands today as the most formidable terrorist organisation of the 21st century. It explores ISIS from the perspective of the Middle East, rather than coming from an Indian foreign policy and security point of view, of which there is no dearth in literature. Such an approach is crucial in understanding the terrorist organisation and dissecting its hierarchical structures, operational mettle, and territorial conquest, as well as in examining its different approaches in Iraq and Syria and its unprecedented use of online media propaganda to further its cause beyond geographical borders.

INTRODUCTION

The liberation of Mosul from the hands of the Islamic State (ISIS) could be a pivotal point in the future of not only Iraq and Syria, but the greater West Asian region. Between 2014 and 2016, ISIS managed to wrest control over large swathes of territory during its heyday; as it expanded, however, ISIS eventually began losing control of its fast-paced growth model. With the narrative now swiftly moving towards a post-ISIS Iraq and Syria, the

survival of the Islamic State as a proto-state is uncertain. This begs the question: What does the future hold for ISIS, its proto-state structure, and its ideological brand?

This paper seeks to chronicle the rise—and the anticipated fall—of the Islamic State, to map the bloodline of the insurgency from its conception until the final battle of Mosul. It quantifies the outcomes around the narrative of ISIS's likely demise, how it will play out regionally, and what the repercussions could look like. This is done by explaining the lineage behind the ideologies of the Islamic State, tracing the DNA of the insurgency movement and ideating the legitimacy to their assumed caliphate. The paper closes by deconstructing the territorial future and ideological debris of an Islamic State in retreat, and their implications for the region's future.

ISIS: FROM AL-QAEDA TO ISLAMIC STATE

The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States (US) as a fallout of the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York, the largest terror strike in history against the Western world, was the starting point in the creation of the jihadist faction known today as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, ISIL, IS or its Arabic name Daesh). However, the perceived history of the militant organisation is entangled—like many other Islamist groups and the conflicts surrounding them—in the sectarian divisions of the Sunni and Shia Islam, poverty, and criminal proclivities emanating from the region's social structures.

The roots of the so-called Islamic State (IS), the Salafist-Jihadist organisation that has managed to catapult itself to the status of the world's premiere terror group over the past three years, can be traced to the late 1990s. ISIS founder and jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi took to a life of crime and rebellion during his youth in the shanty town of Zarqa, a few miles north of Jordan's capital city, Amman. He would eventually be targeted and radicalised by the teachings of his spiritual mentor, one Sheik

Abdul Rahman. During its metamorphosis from being one of many regional jihadist groups in the Middle East to what can now safely be called the biggest and most influential terrorist organisation in the world, ISIS has destroyed and recreated the narratives of Islamist terrorism previously held by the likes of Al-Qaeda. While the now deceased Al-Qaeda chief, Osama bin Laden, rallied funds and ideology to exclusively target the United States, the ideas that drove ISIS from its inception were more localised, targeting regional governments, and only later turning geographical and territorial in hopes of creating a caliphate.¹

However, it was the post-9/11 invasion of Iraq by the US that shot Zarqawi to overnight fame, and it remains a matter of debate whether his naming as an “international terrorist extraordinaire” was by design or realistic intelligence. It may be assumed that ‘Zarqawi’ became a household name on 5 February 2003, when then US Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke at the United Nations Security Council to underscore the US’ case for the invasion of Iraq. “I want to bring to your attention today the potentially much more sinister nexus between Iraq and the Al Qaeda terrorist network, a nexus that combines classic terrorist organizations and modern methods of murder. Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda lieutenants.”²

Zarqawi’s life and legacy will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this paper. What is relevant to mention is that his founding of the Jama’at al-Tawhid wa’al-Jihad (JTJ) in late 2001 was the seed of what is called ISIS today.³ Under JTJ, Zarqawi started to train militants to conduct suicide bombings across the region, more specifically, in Iraq. The murder of USAid officer James Foley in 2002 by JTJ outside his home in Amman, Jordan, placed the group in the global limelight. By that time, Zarqawi also knew that a US invasion was imminent, and wanted to prepare on the ground with other militias. This plan included gaining the support of the powerful Iraqi Shia religious leader Muqtadar al-Sadr, who had launched a military movement staffed by his supporters known as the Jaysh al-Mahdi.

Zarqawi's influence also attracted the interest of other major regional actors such as Al-Qaeda. JTJ joined the Osama bin Laden-led terror outfit in 2004, changing its name to Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn Zarqawi, translated into English as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). During this period, AQI, whose top leadership was not always in tune with the thought process of bin Laden or his then deputy and now AQ chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, believed that fanning sectarian misconduct within Iraqi society was the ideal strategy to gain a strong foothold in a post-Saddam Hussein era.⁴ This strategy of AQI was emboldened in May 2003, following then US President George W. Bush's announcement of an end to the US' major military operations in the country, just days after the toppling of Hussein's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square, symbolising the end of his reign.

The evolution of AQI continued under the political vacuum created with the collapse of Hussein's order and the political infighting between the Shia and Sunni blocs. AQI, in the beginning, found support amongst the Sunnis, who backed the group in the hope that it would deter a takeover of a Shia-majority government in Baghdad.⁵ To maintain this public support, AQI engaged in frequent attacks against Shiite targets such as mosques and localities with majority Shia residents in order to fuel tensions and create an environment of distrust in local government formations. This, initially, brought in a broad base of support for AQI in Iraq, specifically amongst the minority Sunnis who feared a majority Shia-led Baghdad.⁶

However, because of its increasingly violent streak, coupled with its more outward outlook to attack American targets, AQI began losing ground base in Iraq, including within Al-Qaeda. Zarqawi ignored advice from al-Zawahiri to build better ties with the Iraqi leadership (perhaps looking to build a more formalised structure for AQI such as that of al-Sadr). On the ground, AQI's relations with other Islamist factions deteriorated fast, and within Iraq its group of foreign fighters (from other countries like Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Pakistan) were being seen as another foreign occupational force. What expedited the process of the Iraqi government

trying to shut down AQI's operations were the group's bombings of three hotels in Amman, killing 60 people, and the February 2006 bombing of the Shiite Al Askari Shrine in Samarra, 125 km north of Baghdad, which resulted in dozens of retaliatory strikes on Sunni targets within a period of 24 hours.⁷

To correct its course and build a broader support base, AQI joined the Majilis Shua al-Mujahidin (MSM),⁸ an umbrella jihadist organisation consisting of around six Sunni insurgent groups dedicated to fighting the occupying US forces and stopping attempts towards a US-orchestrated transitional government, including pacification of the Sunni populations away from the jihadist narrative. The groups—Jaish al-Taifa al-Mansourah, Saraye Ansar al-Tawhid, Saraya al-Jihad al-Islami Saraya al-Ghoraba, Kitaeb al-Ahwal, and Jaish Ahlul Sunna wa al-Jamma (note that the names of these groups could differ with different sources, as they changed often)—and AQI together planted the seeds of what would come to be known as a different jihadist entity all together, sans Zarqawi's leadership.⁹

During this period of Sunni insurgent reorganisation, dismantling and rearranging of leadership and organisational structures, public support for the AQI was receding, as that for the MSM—which by this time had been fractured within and acting merely as a forum for bickering amongst its members. AQI, within the al-Mujahidin, maintained control of the narrative and did not adhere to the idea of a centralised structure, continuing its practices of gruesome violence including beheadings and suicide bombings, and causing great unease amongst the Sunni communities.

These tactics employed by Zarqawi continued to bother Al-Qaeda's top leadership, which had been encouraging Muslims across the world to travel to Iraq to fight the US invasion. AQI and the top Al-Qaeda leadership, by around 2003, finally seemed to have found some common ground on how the former needs to operate in Iraq, and to what end. The August 2003 truck bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad was a critical point for Zarqawi as well, attacking what the bin Laden-Zawahiri leadership wanted,

targets against American influence (albeit, indirectly). Following this, AQI moved to its original intended mandate of attacking local targets, among them, in governance and state structures, politicians, police, aid workers, NGO officials, and construction businesses.

On 7 June 2006, a US drone strike using 500-lb bombs hit a small house in the town of Baqubah, north of Baghdad, killing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi along with other jihadists. His undoing was, ironically, his spiritual guru himself, as intelligence officials tracked Rahman for weeks to pinpoint the whereabouts of Zarqawi.¹⁰ Abu Ayub al Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Mujahir) was named as Zarqawi's successor to lead AQI, who took upon as his first job the recalibration of the organisation by making it more 'Iraqi', to gather support lost on the ground due to Zarqawi's rigidity.¹¹ Masri's takeover of the AQI was also a small victory for Al-Qaeda who, as mentioned previously, had challenges in managing their own views over AQI than to those of Zarqawi. However, Masri, a close confidant of Zawahiri, had little effect on the tempo of AQI—brutal killings continued, even getting emboldened, as did the pacification of foreign fighters into the Sunni insurgencies.

Taking over the command, Masri negotiated a new council of sorts, incorporating other regional insurgent groups under his ambit and declaring this new coalition as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)¹² while keeping the AQI brand alive in an all-encompassing mentor role. Masri decided to place ISI's operations under a stoic man, a football fan born in the Iraqi city of Samarra, named Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, known today as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This would be the beginning of what is today known as the Islamic State.

THE PERSONALITIES CULT: FROM ZARQAWI TO ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI

Owing to the Islamic State's upbringing in the spotlight of the media, and much more importantly the new and social media, its hierarchy has not

only developed an effective cult-like phenomenon around it, like in a thriller film, but has also managed to become like the mythological chimera. The journey from Zarqawi to Baghdadi is critical to understanding ISIS from the perspective of both radical Islam and that of a highly organised and orchestrated insurgency movement.

This paper describes four main personalities to better illustrate the characters that led to what is commonly now known as one of the deadliest, and until a point the richest, Islamist terror group that has ever existed,¹³ even bigger and more influential than Al-Qaeda due to its threat to the stability of sovereign states in the region (although scholars debate whether such a comparison is even worthy or not).¹⁴ Understanding the lineage of ISI led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Abu Ayub al-Masri, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and finally, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, showcases not only a consistency in both ideology and the interpretation of Islam, but also the continuation of the brand of violence that has attracted thousands of foreign fighters from across the world. From Zarqawi to al-Baghdadi, the initial mandate of AQI shifted drastically, and these four jihadists were the architects of the newest and fiercest branch of jihad.

1: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: Ahmad Fadil al-Khalayleh, later known as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was born in October 1966 in Zarqa, a poverty-stricken city not far north from Jordan's comparatively more secular, liberal and prosperous capital, Amman. Belonging to the Bani Hassan tribe that is closely related to Jordan's Heshemite royal family, Zarqawi had no royalty in his background and lived a challenging childhood.¹⁵ During his formative years, his country was going through a phase of great change, as conservatism, tradition and theology collided with largely US-led westernisation of the Jordanian society. As it is in many such cases, Zarqa did not gain a lot from this. Zarqawi lost his father in 1984 when he was 18 years old. Not long after, he was arrested and imprisoned on charges of drug possession and sexual assault. Zarqawi was radicalised in prison, and after his release carried his indoctrination with him with a sense of purpose. After becoming a familiar face at the al-Hussein Ben Ali mosque

near Zarqa, known to be popular with Islamist radicals, Zarqawi learned about the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan and was soon hired by the Afghan-Arab Bureau, an organisation tasked with providing jihadists to the Islamist forces battling Moscow.¹⁶

Despite his enthusiasm, Zarqawi did not see battle in Afghanistan as the Soviets soon retreated. He arrived with his mother, Omm Sayel, in Peshawar, Pakistan, where the young son of Jordanian-Palestinian mujahid Sheikh Abdullah Azzam joyfully welcomed him. Here he started showing his networking skills despite his reportedly coy nature. In Afghanistan, he also met Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (real name: Isam Muhammad Tahir al-Barqawi), a known Salafist cleric and fighter, and with his guidance understood both the political and military aspects of jihad against the Soviets.¹⁷ Not seeing any military action, Zarqawi along with Maqdisi returned to Jordan, where Zarqawi started to build a terror network based on the spiritual guidance of Maqdisi. As a result of their initial ploys, which were mostly abject failures, both Zarqawi and Maqdisi were sent to 15 years in prison for holding grenades in their possession and being part of a banned organisation. Asked about the weapons during trial, Zarqawi replied that he found them by the roadside; the judge was far from amused. However, getting imprisoned turned out to be a blessing for Zarqawi, as the seeds of radical Islam that he was already carrying were to be emboldened even further. Zarqawi and Maqdisi set up a new organisation called al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad.¹⁸

In prison, Zarqawi started to hone himself as an alpha-jihadist. He spent entire days memorising the Quran, he gained weight and built himself up to physically look more authoritative, and he succeeded in building his repertoire and recruiting members. Soon, Zarqawi surpassed Maqdisi and started to challenge the latter's spiritual authority, relying more on his own instincts than his adviser's pontifications. After leaving prison, Zarqawi started his gradual ascent to become one of the most wanted men in Iraq; soon he would have a bounty of US\$25 million on his head.

It was in prison where Zarqawi made the decision to go to Afghanistan again to build a militia that could export his brand of jihad across the globe. In Herat, southern Afghanistan, he founded the Jund al-Sham group.¹⁹ His camp managed to recruit a healthy number of jihadis, numbering between 2,000 and 3,000 prior to the American invasion in October 2001. During this period of buildup in the year 2000, Zarqawi had also caught the attention of Osama bin Laden, who later met him in Kandahar;²⁰ by the few accounts available, he was received coldly. According to one account, Zarqawi told bin Laden that his jihad was not fierce enough. While Zarqawi seemed to have an ego problem, his naming by then US Secretary of State Colin Powell as the top drawer in America's invasion of Iraq—whether a strategy or a mistake—had propelled him to sky-high fame. From being a relative unknown, Zarqawi became a household name in many parts of the world in 2003.

Bin Laden later invited Zarqawi to join Al-Qaeda, in the hope of seeing through their differences and his own apprehensions in order to build a respectable presence in Iraq. However, Zarqawi was determined to concentrate more on regional operations, taking on corrupt Arab governments and foremost, bringing down the Jordanian monarchy and installing an Islamist state. This viewpoint clashed with bin Laden's larger view of concentrating on targeting the US and Israel. bin Laden's military commander, Saif Al-Adel, brokered a deal between them, making Zarqawi the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Despite the impasse being broken, Zarqawi, true to his defiant nature, refused to pay *bayat* (oath of allegiance) to bin Laden; it did not help in making their relationship warmer. Zarqawi would only agree to the *bayat* in 2004 after months of negotiations and as he realised that he needed to increase his legitimacy in Iraq. The *bayat* provided him with his new title, 'Emir of Al Qaeda's Operations in the Land of Mesopotamia'.²¹

Throughout this period beginning 2004, Al-Qaeda made multiple interventions to control Zarqawi and his extreme violent ways, fearing a loss of base support. For Zarqawi, who anyway thought that the likes of Al-Qaeda

and Taliban were not serious enough about jihad, such advice was not worth heeding, as he continued to defy any attempts of instructions by either bin Laden or his deputy al-Zawahiri and orchestrated gruesome violence across Iraq while propagating the same across much of the Islamic world.

Zarqawi was killed by a US air strike in 2006, just north of Baghdad; he was 39. The transformation of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the reaping of the ideological seeds Zarqawi had sown, however, was just beginning.²²

2: Abu Ayyub al-Mansri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi: The successor to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was chosen in fairly quick time, an indication of both the well-organised structure of Al-Qaeda, and that bin Laden and Zawahiri were happy to see Zarqawi go. The new leader named for AQI was Abu Ayyub al-Mansri, whose real name, the US believed, was Abu Hamza al-Mujahir.²³ Mansri, known to have been born in Egypt in 1968, was a close confidant of al-Zawahiri since the early 1980s. Under Zarqawi, Mansri moved to Iraq in 2001 via Afghanistan and joined Ansar al-Islam, a Kurdish-Sunni militia. Eventually joining AQI, Mansri developed a good relationship with Zarqawi, and became AQI's point man for a variety of roles including intelligence gathering and honing new recruits. After Zarqawi's death, Mansri reorganised and set up Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

The American-led coalition, over a period of time, strafed on the idea whether Mansri was really in control of AQI, as he and one Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, as per reports, led the ISI. A controversy had erupted in 2007 when US military spokesperson Brigadier General Kevin Bergner claimed that according to intelligence reports, al-Baghdadi in fact did not exist.²⁴ The information was traced to the capture of an operative named Khalid al-Mashadani, who claimed to be an intermediary for bin Laden.

Both Mansri and Baghdadi were killed in a ground military operation by the Iraqi Army and American forces in April 2010.

3: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, now the most globally recognised terrorist known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was

born in 1971 in the city of Samarra, north of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. Baghdadi was raised in a largely Sunni area by a family that claimed to be descendants of Prophet Mohammad.²⁵

Similar to many others like him, Baghdadi was diligently religious from the beginning. Committed to Islam, with a penchant for football, Baghdadi was also a product of the political use of religion orchestrated by then Iraq's allegedly secular dictator Saddam Hussein, and his Ba'athist party, in what was known as the 'Faith Campaign' which began in 1993. The campaign was a move to pacify and perhaps even mainstream the Islamist factions then gaining steam in the country, and to raise the Islamic credentials of Iraq.

As part of this move by Saddam, Iraq also created the Saddam University for Islamic Studies, where Baghdadi was to read for his Master's in Quranic recitation. It was here, seeing his inclination towards Islam, that Baghdadi's family member persuaded him to join the Muslim Brotherhood, and much like Zarqawi, he found such an organisation slow and redundant in its approach towards an Islamic reprisal.

Baghdadi founded his first group, Jaysh Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jamaah (JSJ) to fight the US invasion in 2003.²⁶ Soon after, he was arrested, mostly as collateral damage, while he visited a friend who was on the US' wanted list. Baghdadi was detained at the Camp Bucca facility in the region of Umm Qasr, the same one where, at around the same time, one Zarqawi was also imprisoned (there are no references to confirm that Baghdadi and Zarqawi met at Bucca, though it is more than likely that their paths must have crossed in prison).

Camp Bucca was the main agora for jihadists, housed together as the US forces toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein and created a political vacuum that Iraq still struggles to deal with today. The policy of the US to gather jihadists together in Bucca, under one roof, was something that worked hugely in favor of the insurgents. The already radicalised inmates, within the confines of the camp, realised that this was the perfect place to

make contacts and create contingency plans for the future, right under the noses of their American jailers.²⁷

Baghdadi at Bucca made strong inroads, creating contacts and riling up support. He was released on 8 December 2004, being classified as a civil detainee and not a jihadist. Within days, he started to build contacts with Al-Qaeda and his own group, JSJ, became one of the first to join the anti-US coalition of jihadists under Al-Qaeda's guidance. As Baghdadi made inroads within the jihadist circles, and even successfully defending his PhD in Islamic Studies at the same time, his credentials as a devout scholar of Islam with a direct lineage to the Prophet and a battle-hardened past gave him precedence over many of his peers.²⁸

After the death of Zarqawi, the new AQI chief Masri forged ahead with the idea of Islamic State, and Baghdadi bagged a role managing religious affairs for this new group and spread their ideology and propaganda across the Iraqi provinces to gather support, a task in which Baghdadi excelled. He later became the supervisor of IS's Sharia Committee, responsible for enforcing the group's ideologies practically.

Masri and Abu Umar, two main figureheads of IS at that time, blew themselves up in April 2010 after their hideout in Tikrit was compromised and surrounded by a joint US-Iraqi operation. This left the field wide open on who would take over the reins, and internal council members and Al-Qaeda's leadership entered into a tussle. Eventually, through internal politics mostly played by Islamic State's then military council chief Hajji Bakr, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was chosen to be the new emir.

By the time Baghdadi settled in, political uncertainty had erupted in Syria in 2011. The new emir capitalised on this opportunity to expand. Baghdadi entered Syria via the creation of the Nusra Front (currently known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or HTS). Over a period of some months Baghdadi made strong ground in Iraq, and by 2014 large cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul fell to the Islamic State, giving him more access to expand operations into Syria.

Baghdadi, until now an emir, then moved to consolidate his power further, controlling and commanding a legion of fighters as the “caliph”. Once he had Mosul, Baghdadi appeared at the al-Nuri mosque to preside over the Friday sermons, cementing his new title. This was, until date, his one and only public appearance, as he remains the most elusive figure in the complex and competitive hierarchy of the Islamic State. In what is still the only seminal work on Baghdadi, the author of the article, ‘The Believer: How Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became leader of the Islamic State’, Will McCants, says deciphering the enigma-like status around Baghdadi depends on what happens when he dies while as caliph. “The answer depends on what one makes of his life. For some Baghdadi is just a cipher, manipulated by non-religious ex-Ba’athists or thugs who are using the Islamic State to attain power. For others he is a cog in a machine, an impression of an impersonal institution or historical forces. These views at least agree that Baghdadi is not his own man; his sins are the sins of others, perhaps Saddam Hussein, perhaps George W. Bush, perhaps a cabal of former regime loyalists.”²⁹

Ultimately, the rationale for studying these personalities is to decipher their effects on the mass movements behind them, specifically in this case where operationally the Islamic State has mimicked institutional structures of a nation-state setup, with taxation, military, and local councils, among others being activated, giving it operational legitimacy—ambitious attempts that have seen pockets of success.

THE OPERATIONS: IRAQ AND SYRIA

One of the greatest questions around the rise of the Islamic State is how such a non-state insurgency group managed to become a militarily calibrated unit. During the period 2014-2015, IS captured millions of square miles in both Iraq and Syria, serving a blow to both the Iraqi government of then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, who continues to hold power.

There are many theories on the factors that not only gave birth to a terror group such as ISIS³⁰ but allowed it to thrive in resources and territory. This paper finds evidence in the hypothesis that the failures in Iraq revolving around the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and the subsequent sectarian and authoritarian government of al-Maliki, offered a fertile environment for Sunni insurgents to recognise, organise and direct their agenda with ease both in the divided Iraqi-minority Sunni population and the thousands of fighters, officers and trained for battle Ba'athist regime generals who were now available, without a purpose.³¹

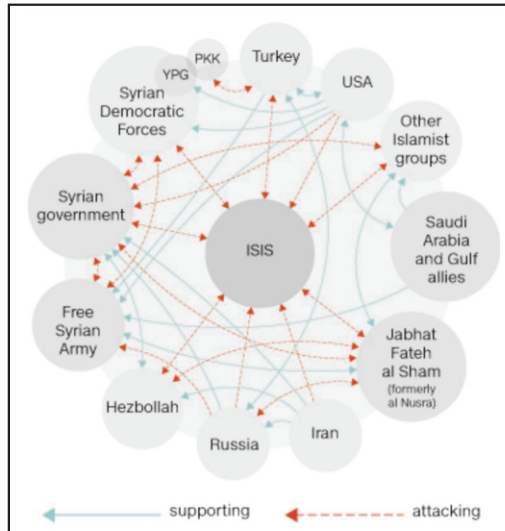
The 'Sunni disenfranchisement' in Iraq after the American invasion toppled Saddam Hussein's sectarian Iraq, a by-the-stick implemented Ba'athist policy, gathered pace quickly. Being the minority, Sunnis in Iraq were worried over their own future in the country and the formulation of the new governance structures, and their own representation. The victory of al-Maliki in 2006, much to the delight of the home of Shiite Islam, Iran, and his eight-year long rule would provide the perfect canvas for AQI and other Sunni insurgencies to spread sectarian discord.

The starting point—or perhaps more aptly, the tipping point—was Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the American war against Iraq to dismantle the regime of Saddam who, according to the US, was supporting and promoting terrorist activities and was in possession of weapons of mass destruction. As part of OIF, a critical phase called ECLIPSE II (alternately known as PHASE IV, and named after ECPLISE I, which dealt with de-Nazification of post-World War II Germany) was going to go down in history as the biggest factor for the ease of militarisation of not just AQI, but of various other intra-sectarian insurgencies as well.³²

The decision to disband the Iraqi Army, and make 400,000 troops and nearly 50,000 Ba'athist officials jobless overnight, had trouble written all over it.³³ The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was tasked with driving Iraq from the post-Saddam era to the progressive, democratic and inclusive vision of Washington DC and President George W. Bush. The CPA was led

by American diplomat Paul Bremer, who held solid credentials with his work previously in Afghanistan, and came under the supervision of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. With CPA, the US orchestrated one of the most poorly judged political vacuums in the country, the aftermath of which the world continue to witness today. The US, with just a “hand wave gesture”, disbanded the Iraqi Army.³⁴

Fig. 1: Who is fighting whom in Syria?³⁵



During the period from 2003 to 2006, the US held sole responsibility for the security of Iraq, and American troops were in every possible way seen as an occupying colonialist force, something Iraq historically is familiar with. Such optics were to gravely damage the American Iraqi project, far beyond the fallacy of the occupation to begin with, on the back of Zarqawi being perceived as a mere proxy.

This vacuum split the now unemployed army veterans and Ba’athist officials amongst various insurgencies. With their trade being handling weapons, and killing, and no post-disbanding vocations or alternatives offered, the personnel found themselves more useful to the insurgencies against the Americans than sitting idly. AQI, and later ISIS, were to gain the most from this fallacy by Bremer.

The swift fall of Mosul in June 2014 and of Tikrit later the same month were treated as declarations by ISIS of both their capabilities, and seriousness in acquiring a territorial governate for the so-called caliphate. ISIS takeover of these regions of Iraq faced little resistance from Sunni minorities, despite their apprehensions as discussed earlier in this paper. Aided by an onslaught of media propaganda that showcased theatrical beheadings of ISIS' opponents, the terror group faced subdued challenge from Iraqi military and police forces. Both Mosul and Tikrit, under ISIS, got new governors, both former Ba'athists in the Saddam regime. Abd al-Rashid, a former senior Ba'athist official took over Tikrit, and Azhar al-Obeidi, a former Iraqi Army general, took charge of Mosul.³⁶

In the lead-up to this period, al-Maliki's policies in Iraq only inflamed the situation further. The militias fighting the likes of AQI began to come under heat, as Maliki moved to pacify the Sunni population. He cornered Shia cleric al-Sadr in Basra and forced him to give up to the government, while disarming a host of groups. However, Maliki's schizophrenic approach to play the Iraqi sectarian field not only continued to cower down his own power in Iraq, but also cornered the US on how to deal with the escalating situation.³⁷ The prime minister started to replace Sunni and Kurdish leaders and officers in Iraqi governance with Shia ones while moving politically closer to Tehran, a foe of the US, knowing well that the Bush administration had little option but to support him.³⁸

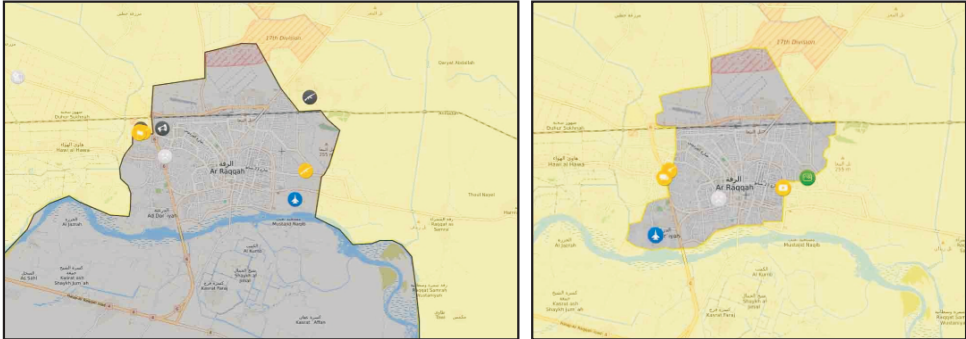
By 2014, the last year of Maliki's rule, the Sunnis were already in revolt against his government in Baghdad. As ISIS moved into Sunni-held areas of the country, they found themselves facing less resistance, starting with almost a welcome ceremony in Fallujah, as they took over the town in January of that year.

By this time, the seeds of ISIS ideology planted in Syria by Zarqawi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi were growing. The idea of the caliphate was a territorial conquest of Iraq and Syria, and perhaps even beyond, if propaganda was to be believed. The 2011 revolt against Assad gave ISIS,

dominant in Iraq, an opportunity to spread its wings and cement its presence. To punctuate its dominance and seriousness over territory, ISIS declared Raqqa, a city on the banks of the Euphrates River in Syria as its capital—a significant symbolic move considering that the insurgency originated from Iraq.

Fig. 2(a): Raqqa under ISIS (June 2017)

Fig. 2(b): Raqqa under ISIS (July 2017)³⁹



Syria, another sectarian theatre where the majority (Shias) were ruled by the minority Alawite government of the Assad family, almost simply landed on ISIS’ lap. The uprising against the Assad family was an extension of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, a string of protests that had enamored the global community over the ideas of justice and democracy in the smorgasbord of sectarian Middle East politics. Like Iraq, Syria was also a sectarian experiment in the Middle East, with majority of the population being Sunni, but having little representation in governance as the Assad family ruled the country for decades.

The Syrian theatre, like Iraq, gave many opportunities for various insurgencies to build on, including the Assad regime’s opportunistic tactics to pitch these groups against each other and offer the narrative that Islamists launched the Arab Spring protests against his government. However, in Syria, it proved to be more complicated for ISIS as Al-Qaeda and its now former affiliate, the Nusra Front, along with a host of groups, some backed by the US, created a complicated web of antagonists. The interventions of Russia and Iran to make sure the Assad government does

not fall and ISIS does not control the Syrian borders with Central Asia caused further complications beyond the region.

Bashar al-Assad took over the reins of Syria from his father, Hafez al-Assad, chief of Syria's Ba'ath Party who launched a coup d'état in 1970, backed by the Soviet Union. This historical leeway made by Moscow in the 1970s still remains as its main access point to the region, and is seen as part of Russia's sphere of influence. The protection provided by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Assad over the past few years is Moscow looking after its only influence point in a region where Western powers largely dominate the narrative, specifically with the Arab Gulf states. In a sense, the current situation in Syria over the triangulation between Damascus, Washington, and Moscow is a continuation of the rhetoric from the Cold War period. ISIS provided a solid reason for Russia to enter the battle on two main fronts—first, as mentioned earlier, to protect its only political and military entry point in the region and second, to genuinely make sure that ISIS does not try to either influence or relocate in Central Asia. As of 2016, reports suggested that nearly 2,500 Russians were fighting in the ranks of ISIS. Unofficial numbers state above the count of 8,000 fighters.⁴⁰

Today, ISIS' brutality exhibited in Syria over the past three years is only part of the problem in the Syrian civil war. The Syrian Army is fighting ISIS, America-backed militias including the Kurds, and a cocktail of jihadist groups primarily fighting against the government but also amongst themselves. ISIS, arguably, had a strenuous time in Syria trying to establish the caliphate than in Iraq, with groups such as the Nusra Front driving their own agenda, later even separately from Al-Qaeda, for an Islamist state, which by their design, did not include either the Assad government or ISIS.

To put things further in perspective from Syria's point of view, in the battle for the so-called caliphate's capital in Raqqa, US-backed militias aided by American Special Forces and air support have made significant headway in pushing back against ISIS from the eastern regions of the

country. However, like in many other parts of the conflict, as territory recedes from ISIS hands, it does not represent an overall victory over ISIS.

With territorial losses, ISIS is leaving behind a huge political vacuum, similar to the one it had itself taken over during the period of 2014-15. However, the major difference on this occasion is that the vacuum has left behind even larger caches of weapons than ever before, and there is no one entity, including the Syrian government, that is ready to control these areas as a unit. Raqqa may yet become the first post-ISIS challenge for the US-led coalition, with a complex web of Shiite and Sunni militias, religious leaders, and legitimate regional actors such as the Kurds vying for territorial supremacy. However, the bigger threat will remain that a 'Band-Aid' solution may be applied in a post-ISIS Syria, bartering the critical aspect of stability with short-term gains of military withdrawal and setting up puppet systems of governance. This, after all, is characteristic of the West's interventionist history in the region.⁴¹ Often, this tradeoff between short-term objectives and enduring goals of economic and political prosperity gives rebirth to insurgencies, and ends up restarting the vicious cycle of violence, extremism and sectarianism.

While Iraq is a comparatively more straightforward war against ISIS, the involvement of Iran and Russia makes Syria a much more complicated theatre. While Iran-backed militias actively confront ISIS in Syria, they are also systematically creating space for their own armed factions as well as Hezbollah, coming in direct conflict with not only anti-Assad forces, but Al-Qaeda, the Kurds, US-backed militias, and various smaller Islamist groups vying for space vacated by ISIS.

Raqqa, at the time of this writing, was entering a phase where the eighth-century walls around the city had been breached by the Syrian Democratic Forces, an Arab coalition, and Kurdish fighters. Despite repeated marketing of the narrative of the loss of territory by ISIS as a "victory" against the terrorist group, the battle for Raqqa has been, and is going to remain, a long drawn one. While more than 50,000 civilians remain inside the city, acting as a shield between the warring parties, this jihadist

status quo will perhaps continue for years to come. However, declaring victories and the “liberation” of cities is also part of the war against ISIS narratives, specifically those raging around territorial conquests.

The battles waged in Iraq and Syria against ISIS are not going to be decided in the near future, as military achievements in containment differ from establishing a workable system to make sure ISIS or even other Islamist groups do not regain lost ground. In fact, scholars such as Charlie Winter, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR) in London, have raised questions whether ISIS losing cities such as Mosul have been, in fact, false-flag operations by the group.⁴² Winter argues that the ways of ISIS operations inciting gruesome violence, committing grave atrocities against local populations such as rape and murder, would challenge an insurgency’s prominence within a given territory. Highlighting that the aim of ISIS to establish statehood had been a catastrophic failure, Winter puts forward a pertinent question: “What if, more than anything else including territory, the group (ISIS) just wants to be the ideological hegemon of global jihadism? In this pursuit, the realization of ideological aspirations is far more important than the permanent administration of any piece of land, even if it comes at great material cost.”⁴³

In all probability, ISIS will look into re-establishing itself as more of a guerilla movement than a statehood. The outcomes of such a downgrade towards ISIS’ mandate as a group and perhaps more importantly, as a caliphate, are not yet quantifiable and existing research on this aspect of the insurgency is mostly grounded on conjecture, at best. To understand the survivability prospects of ISIS, it is important to understand the group’s operations as a state.

OPERATIONS OF ISIS

The following sections will discuss three main aspects relating to the operations of ISIS. While the intricacies of running a quasi-state are fairly

complex, ISIS has managed to develop systems to govern its *wilayats* (provinces). Upon setting up of the wilayats, a first course of action is to set up an intelligence state and persecute enemies in a bid to make sure no uprising will take place. Beyond the ‘statehood’, IS tries to establish an ‘official-looking’ structure including erecting *dawa* billboards, media points where ISIS fighters can come and submit propaganda material, cleaning of public spaces, and ‘purification’ which includes destruction of shrines, desecration of graves, persecution and mass execution of gays, and punishment (such as public crucifixions and floggings) for stealing, smoking cigarettes, or consuming alcohol.⁴⁴

Military, online and media propaganda, and financing are the three pillars of ISIS’ success. As discussed earlier in this paper, many spaces where the group was able to create its territorial power in fact welcomed ISIS as it came in, specifically in Iraq, leaving little resistance to begin with.

Military

In May 2017, the war minister of ISIS, Abu Musab al-Masri, was reportedly killed in the Syrian city of Aleppo. The war minister is perhaps the second most important person in ISIS hierarchy after the caliph, al-Baghdadi, especially after the death of ISIS official spokesperson and chief propagandist Mohammad al-Adnani in Aleppo, Syria, in August last year. Al-Adnani was touted to be Baghdadi’s replacement if the caliph is killed.⁴⁵

ISIS runs its own version of a defense ministry called the ‘war office’, which reports directly to the caliph, bypassing the command structure of the cabinet. Like a territorial force, the war minister is responsible for directing and managing all combat operations and attacks. However, hierarchically, it is not necessary that the war minister is an automatic second-in-command to Baghdadi.

ISIS’ main military strategy as a territorial force was to take control of people’s daily sources of income, specifically taxation, and holding public events to propagate their version of Sharia which was to be installed in the

regions under their control. The war minister was responsible for devising strategies for military protection and governance of the wilayats, and the said control varied across regions depending on the type of resistance ISIS faced.

There are no specific outputs by ISIS relating to the operations of its military strategies. Understanding ISIS' military identity can be done primarily by dividing the organisation's operations in the pre-caliphate and post-caliphate timelines. AQI largely operated as a guerrilla militant front, using Improvised Explosive Device (IEDs), homemade improvised attack vehicles,⁴⁶ ambush tactics and hiding among the local populations to conduct their operations. ISIS in the post-2014 period had devised its military tactics around territorial conquest. This did not only allow for the group to ramp up further support for itself, but also, as strategy, made it easier for the variety of armies and militias to target ISIS in a more conventional form of warfare, one which forces such as the Kurds and even the Syrian Army had more experience with. The territorial loss experienced by ISIS in 2017 has in fact forced the group back into the urban guerrilla warfare front, which could lengthen the existence of ISIS itself. While the territorial losses may change the trajectory of ISIS' military strategies, they do not translate to the end of ISIS as an idea itself.

Online/Media Propaganda

"To every media operative brother in the Islamic State, you should know and be convinced of the following fact, that the media is a jihad in the way of Allah and that you, with your media work, are therefore mujahid in the way of Allah."⁴⁷

- 'Media Operative, You Are A Mujahid, Too'

Perhaps more than the military aspect of its operations, which is of course directed towards a territorial approach within the geographies of Iraq and Syria masquerading as the Islamic State, it is ISIS' dedicated and knowledgeable use of the media that has added the most towards its

jihadist brand value across the globe. Other than using existing, Western-developed social media platforms for clinical use in spreading propaganda and fear across the world, ISIS in fact has a more methodical approach towards distribution of information.

The media is considered as a sacrosanct feature of ISIS' operations, giving it the same importance as its militias fighting the physical battles in the real world. ISIS has used Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram and various other services to great effect in both spreading its ideology, and perhaps more importantly, recruiting people from around the world to be part of its caliphate.

To understand the success of ISIS' outreach using new-media platforms, it is first important to answer how it props up its online armies to execute so-called 'media jihad', offering its intended audience well stage-managed, executed and produced content glorifying the caliphate, its conquests, and the representation of Sharia that the group has installed, among others. As a spawn of AQI, ISIS' inherent understanding of the power of media is strong, and goes beyond social media to forums, old-school chat rooms and even cassettes, in the late 1990s.⁴⁸ Osama bin Laden was himself well-versed with the power of television, seeing its effects in action during the first Gulf War when the conflict became the first one to be broadcast live in American living rooms. 9/11 was a 'television spectacle' for Al-Qaeda, knowing that such an event would not only be broadcast across all of America, but to the whole world. After bin Laden's killing in May 2011 in Abbottabad, Pakistan, by an American SEAL team, host of materials were recovered from the compound including videos and audio recordings.⁴⁹ One of the most telling video recordings from this cache was of bin Laden, clutching a TV remote, watching coverage of himself on a cable news channel.⁵⁰ For Al-Qaeda and others, the transformation from 'traditional' media to digital did not happen overnight, as most kept to the traditional ways of burning content onto cassettes, and later CDs and DVDs, for distribution. However, bin Laden eventually had an epiphany that he should no longer ignore these new media 'gatekeepers' behind cable

television; that laid the foundations for jihadist outreach to use mainstream media outlets against their own game.⁵¹ There are other Islamists who have wielded the media as a jihad tool—such as Abu Musab al-Suri, a suspected-Al-Qaeda member and jihadi writer born in Syria but of Spanish citizenship currently known to be in a Syrian prison after his deportation from Pakistan in 2005. In his seminal work published in 2004, titled, ‘A Call to a Global Islamic Resistance’, al-Suri highlighted the critical role of the internet for jihadists, so much so that he prophesied that due to technological advancements in media tools, physical hierarchical structures were no longer needed for conducting jihad, and new media would be sufficient. He ideated that every Muslim’s home can become a training camp or forward base, rather than relying on large bases that could be easily targeted by their enemies.⁵²

In understanding ISIS’ media strategy, a key document is ‘Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too’—a guide to the group’s ideas, thoughts, requirements and propagations. This text, derived from a shorter version on media ethics for ISIS published by the Al-Himma Library, a media outlet tasked with publishing mostly religious pamphlets and manifestos for ISIS.⁵³ Released in April 2016 in Arabic on Telegram (the chat platform preferred by ISIS and pro-ISIS accounts due to its data encryption offerings)—the document was written by an anonymous author and addresses ISIS online support base. It called the individual supporters of the group and the caliphate online, around the world, as the “media mujahidin”. The document’s job is seemingly to make sure that the online support base does not feel any less important than the ground troops constituting the physical caliphate; this highlights the importance of the media narrative for ISIS.

One of the more pertinent sections of this document states: “We are in a battle and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media.”⁵⁴ While the messaging here seems to highlight the importance of the media wars for ISIS, the background of this particular take on the importance of information warfare is clouded and based on false

information itself—in other words, propaganda within propaganda. According to scholar Charlie Winter, the above messaging was in fact first delivered by Al-Qaeda’s al-Zawahiri in a letter to Zarqawi, highlighting AQI’s brutal approach to jihad and explaining that such “ultraviolet” approach was a bad way to promote their ideology—it displayed them in poor light in the media to local populations of the region. However, ISIS, already at odds with Al-Qaeda’s leadership, turned this approach on its head and formalised their approach via propaganda for their media mujahids.

After 2014, ISIS’ media drive became more well-calculated and executed. From beheading videos, featuring ISIS fighters in black overalls and their prisoners in orange jumpsuits—not unlike those worn by prisoners in the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison where the US holds terror suspects for years, often without charges⁵⁵—to tactical use of social media such as Twitter to spread pictures and videos of shocking violence. ISIS realised early on that such an approach to its media policies was effective in spreading fear amongst the people of the territories it held. Moreover, ISIS knows that the Western media will only willingly accept its narratives and disseminate them to a much wider audience across the world.⁵⁶

To spread its media wars effectively and to legitimise its caliphate, ISIS has four main outlets that it directly or indirectly feeds with information. There is, for one, *Amaq*, a website that regularly releases ISIS statements, operational details including infographics, and runs media outputs on platforms such as Telegram using official groups. There is also *Rumiyah*, a glossy magazine brought out under the ‘Himmah Publications’ badge, that may be called “the Newsweek” of the Islamic State—it covers pro-ISIS activities from around the world. For example, *Rumiyah*’s issue number 10’s cover story, ‘Jihad in East Asia’, describes the Philippines’ war against the Abu Sayyaf group (unofficially known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant – Philippines Province) after the Islamist group announced its allegiance to Baghdadi in 2016.^{57,58}

The third outlet, *Dabiq*, is now defunct and the former avatar of *Rumiyah*. It was *Dabiq* that initially brought to mainstream discussion

ISIS' capabilities for formalising information delivery. It had a glossy look and well-produced layouts, and seemed like a professional, state-run media enterprise.⁵⁹ According to analysts such as Harleen K Gambhir, Dabiq was a representation of an "outward-looking interpretation" of ISIS, working towards becoming influential beyond the borders of territorial gains in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁰ The magazine was discontinued and replaced with Rumiyaah, after the prophesised town of Dabiq near Aleppo was lost by ISIS to Syrian rebels in October 2016 (*Al Naba*, a newsletter, was also launched following Dabiq's end). The final media outlet officially linked to ISIS is the most elusive, and perhaps the most important one: the Nashir Media Foundation (NMF) is known as ISIS' direct official channel, and is used less to announce information and more for directives. For example, in December last year, the NMF released a statement calling for attacks during Christmas events, specifically addressing the "IS wolves" in Europe.⁶¹

While the official and semi-official nature of these outlets are not well-documented, the target audience for these releases are in the social media. The ease of accessibility of ISIS propaganda online is a problem that has no immediate solutions with the open nature of the world wide web itself being the worst enemy in fighting such content. The micro-blogging site Twitter was one of the first major platforms where ISIS and pro-ISIS propaganda appeared in significant numbers. Indeed, it was not only ISIS that used Twitter to their advantage, but also other militant groups such as Al Shabaab during the 2013 siege of the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, where the terror group 'live-tweeted' the entire operation as its fighters killed 66 civilians.⁶²

ISIS' approach to social media has not been a learn-as-you-go exercise; it employed technically educated jihadis, most probably foreigners who had travelled to fight for the caliphate, to create a robust online sphere of influence. According to a seminal study on ISIS and its use of Twitter conducted by researchers J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan for the Brookings Institution, during the timeframe between 4 October and 27

November 2014, there were more than 46,000 active pro-ISIS accounts on Twitter alone. Berger and Morgan's study highlighted the location of the Twitter users as well, with Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, the US, and Egypt claiming the top five spots.⁶³ Twitter arrived late to the battle against the pro-ISIS accounts on its site, after deliberations within the digital communities of issues ranging from policing online to whether suspensions of accounts celebrating a terror strike (and not committing one) goes against the freedoms of speech and of expression. However, with increased examples of online radicalisation and attacks in Europe being largely instigated by ISIS using the internet, the approach by services such as Twitter was forcibly changed. By the second half of 2016, Twitter had suspended more than 376,000 accounts, a starkly larger number compared to Berger and Morgan's estimates from 2014.

Twitter's crackdown against ISIS led the terror group's supporters to look for alternatives. ISIS created its own Twitter-like app for Arabic users, called 'The Dawn of Glad Tidings' (or just 'Dawn'), which was launched for Android systems in 2014. Dawn, based on the platform of a popular American app called Thunderclap, which was used by the likes of former US President Barack Obama's campaign to gather online support for his candidacy in 2010.⁶⁴ Users joined Dawn as a primary platform to post content on Twitter, with ISIS operatives directly controlling the content themselves, and individual users having little to no control over what was published out of their accounts via this homemade app.⁶⁵ After Dawn was pulled offline from download portals such as Google Play, ISIS moved to already established systems, and Telegram was the favoured one.

In 2015, ISIS' proto-official channels such as Nashir and Amaq moved to Telegram (Nashir, meanwhile, also launched its own app).⁶⁶ The then newly launched 'channel' feature in the service offered users a broadcast option, which did not have any user limitations. This allowed ISIS channels to broadcast propaganda to an unlimited number of users, and with Telegram's encryption offerings, intelligence agencies countering ISIS online were held back due to non-conformity of the owners of Telegram to

offer a backdoor access to security agencies. Despite various reports of countries such as Iran having cracked Telegram's encryption, ISIS continues to use it as its premiere information distribution platform, predominantly choosing to use it for announcements and staking claims to attacks around the world.⁶⁷

According to a new research on ISIS' use of Telegram, more than just a safe source for distributing information, the nature of the platform and the way it offers options to users gives a near-perfect system for a group such as ISIS, and its 'media mujahids', to spread its online propaganda. The links shared on Telegram channels with the users usually have an expiry time of between 30 minutes and two hours (although 30 minutes seems to be the more preferred activation time). This strategy, cunningly, makes sure those ISIS propagandists online stay online for long durations of time in attempts not to miss any of the said content.⁶⁸

The creation of propaganda by ISIS was also in many ways groundbreaking. The terror group pulled out all stops in offering theatrical takes of their violence—using the latest 4K high-definition cameras and drones, and employing high-quality editing skills. This uptake in production of media propaganda has rubbed off even on other jihadist groups currently involved in the fight against ISIS, masquerading as 'rebels' or 'opposition', specifically the likes of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. HTS, an Islamist group formerly affiliated with Al-Qaeda, who also started to produce Hollywood-like productions of its operations against the various factions it was in battle with, including ISIS and the Syrian Army.⁶⁹ As a counter, anti-Assad forces such as the Free Syrian Army, a group of Western-backed former Syrian Army soldiers who defected during the Arab Spring period in order to bring down the Assad government, have also now started to produce counter-propaganda of the same scale, with cinematic production, boisterous music scores, and arresting imagery.⁷⁰

All these operations have proven to be highly effective, for ISIS, more on a global level as part of their narrative, and for others, including the

opposition, for reaching out to local populations to join the fight against the Islamic State. However, all this is possible also because ISIS has successfully managed to create a self-sustained financial state. While its financial capabilities have since been diminished, ISIS at its peak conquests in 2014-15 was possibly the richest terror organisation in the world.

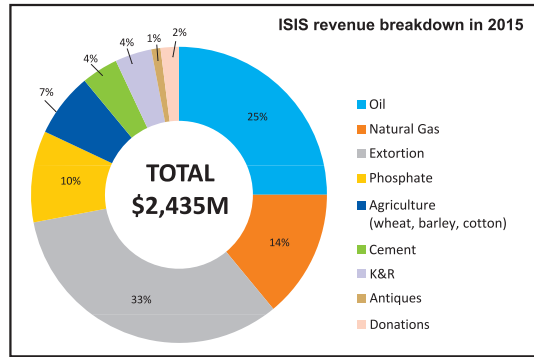
Finances

With territorial conquest came the economic spoils. ISIS' efficient conquest of territory meant it needed money to sustain its new proto-state and the citizens, its fighters and other such quasi-state units as well. The Islamic State's estimated value at the end of 2015, which could be determined as its peak period, was estimated to be a little over US\$2 billion. As highlighted throughout this paper, ISIS' base of operations and strategic eloquence for a successful insurgency was solidified well before the phase of 2014-15. As American intelligence had found years earlier, during the reign of AQI, Iraqi insurgency had already attained financial independence, raising anywhere between US\$70 million to US\$200 million from a range of largely criminal activities and territorial taxation, with donations only accounting for a small percentage in 2005-06.⁷¹

According to a study conducted by the Center for the Analysis of Terrorism in 2015,⁷² the following were the main streams of revenue for ISIS (excluding the taxes):

- Extortion
- Oil
- Donations
- Antiques
- K&R
- Natural gas
- Phosphate
- Agriculture
- Cement

Fig. 3



Source: CAT 2015⁷³

Like a sound business, ISIS did not rely on only one financial stream, and instead spread out its portfolio. In 2015, oil constituted 25 percent of its revenues. This dropped drastically by 2016, as both Russian and American coalition air strikes targeted oil wells, ISIS’ makeshift oil refineries and oil trucks, giving a severe blow to the group’s oil smuggling business.

ISIS’ oil business in fact offered a great insight on how natural resources, despite the differences between the warring parties, have been used by these groups for making money. ISIS’s biggest market for selling oil was domestic, as well as, often, other warring parties and even, according to some reports, the Syrian government. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the Assad regime’s purchase of oil from ISIS is helping the group sustain itself amidst the relentless attacks from multiple corners in Iraq and Syria.⁷⁴ Money from the regime for oil is now ISIS’ largest financial contributor,⁷⁵ even higher than revenues earned from extortions. Between 2014-15, ISIS lost—from 82 percent revenues earned from natural resources in 2014 down to 60 percent in 2015; revenues from criminal activities, meanwhile, went up from 16 percent in 2014 to 38 percent in 2015.⁷⁶ ISIS has a cabinet-rank finance minister, and although his primary job is to control taxation, along with military commanders the said person manages other revenue streams as well, including financial dealings beyond ISIS territories (which includes finding donations). In March 2016, Abd al-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli, known to be ISIS’ finance minister, was

killed in a US-led airstrike. His death was announced by then US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter as part of a larger US narrative to take out ISIS' hierarchy.⁷⁷ ISIS' overall revenue, according to a study by EY's Investigation and Disputes Services team and King's College London, has fallen from an estimated US\$2 billion in 2014 to less than US\$800 million in 2015.⁷⁸

Table 1: Islamic State Income, 2014-2016

	2014 (in \$m)	2015 (in \$m)	2016 (in \$m)
Taxes and Fees	300-400	400-800	200-400
Oil	150-450	435-550	200-250
Kidnapping	20-40	Not known	10-30
Antiquities	Not known	Not known	Not known
Foreign Donations	Insignificant	Insignificant	Insignificant
Looting, Confiscations, Fines	500-1,000	200-350	110-190
TOTAL	970-1,890	1,035-1,700	520-870

Source: ICSR⁷⁹

ISIS also attempted to go beyond oil, which comparatively is easier to handle (and sell) than other natural commodities, such as natural gas or precious metal. However, it faced roadblocks in gathering the required expertise to operate in these industries and resorted to releasing advertisements for jihadis with skills in manning oil and gas assets and offering up to US\$180,000 in salary.⁸⁰

As the campaign against ISIS intensified, the group's income from natural resources started to dry up, and as previously highlighted, taxation and criminal activities became the cottage industries that fueled the Islamic State. ISIS imposes taxes on almost all economic activities from the eight million people living within the territories under its control—a population higher than that of countries like Denmark. ISIS also charges religious minorities a *jizia*, or protection tax. Beyond taxation, it also levies a fee on services such as water and electricity. For example in Raqqa, Syria,

ISIS' departments such as Diwan al-Khadamat (Services Department) devoted their time and effort to extorting funds from local residents.

Territorial losses since 2016, however, also mean loss of population that ISIS controls, and can tax, or extort from. This has added immense pressure on its resources, forcing it to employ other more risky methods to gain access to funding, such as the hawala system. The employment of jizia also grew in importance, with ISIS increasing its targeting of Yezidi and Assyrian Christians. Over a period of time, the United Nations has acknowledged paying ISIS nearly US\$1 million in ransom for securing the release of nearly 200 religious minorities in Syria.

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND SCENARIOS

The victory of the Iraqi Army in Mosul over ISIS was a significant event, although one that could ignite more questions than answers over the future of the region. Iraq's current Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, visited the newly 'liberated' city to announce the end of ISIS after days long stretch of military operations that saw the destruction of the historic Al-Nuri mosque, ISIS' last known bailiwick in the city and a significant symbol of the Islamic State itself.

However, attaining political stability and security for both Syria and Iraq is going to remain a complex challenge even after the territorial defeat of ISIS. Comparatively, Iraq could be seen as a more stable case, with no Russian involvement and the Iraqi government along with the US remaining as the two major influence points in directing the precarious reconstruction and political recalibration process in the post-ISIS period. While Iran, as the Shiite power center, remains an omnipresent political power in Iraqi society, economy, and politics, Tehran's role in post-ISIS Iraq is contestable, despite both parties earlier finding common ground both on Prime Minister al-Maliki and on now chief al-Abadi.⁸¹

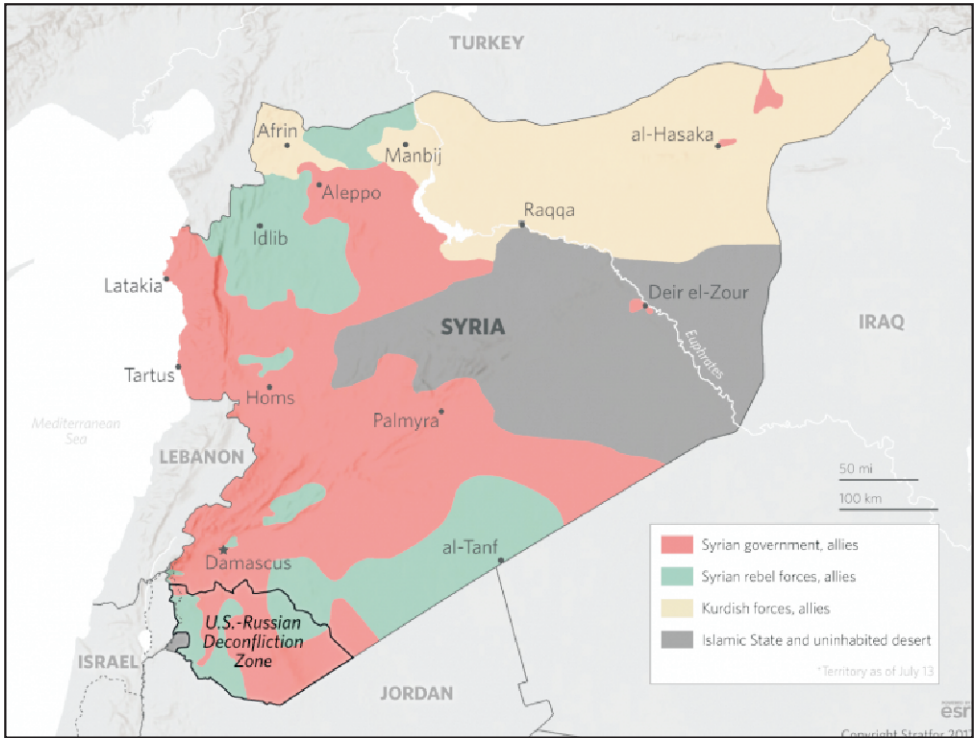
The fall of Mosul is a milestone in the fight against ISIS and has spurred the narrative of the end of the Islamic State. Whilst this may be true

towards the proto-state structures of the so-called caliphate, it is widely accepted that the ideology and nature of ISIS is going to remain active in the region for the near future. Researcher Cole Bunzel, in his work, 'From Paper State to Islamic State: The ideology of the Islamic State', argues that despite the success of the US-led Western coalition, a military campaign can in fact strengthen the ISIS ideology on three fronts. The first of course being the international intervention by the US, Russia and Iran; second, the Shiite order trying to undermine the Sunnis (an argument bolstered by American opening with Iran with the nuclear deal); and third, the secular Arab order (predominantly targeting the minority Alawite Assad government) itself being a threat to the jihadist ideology.⁸²

However, the disintegration of ISIS is not the only worry for the region. Until date, most groups in the region fought the Islamic State despite their ulterior agendas towards either the Syrian government or each other. For example, the Kurds and the Kurdish Peshmerga in the northern parts of Iraq and Syria, who constitute the largest ethnic group in the world without a state, and various Kurdish movements, have fought for independence in Iraq, Syria and most notably, Turkey,⁸³ sacrificing soldiers and resources fighting ISIS, which was critical for their own survival. With its anti-ISIS operations coming down significantly, the Kurds have already started extended talks with the Iraqi government over a fully independent Kurdistan (beyond the autonomous status it currently holds), carved out of northern Iraqi territory. The Kurds, who hold territory as 'war spoils' taken away from ISIS are now offering it back to Iraq as leverage in exchange for independence status.⁸⁴

The problem with this impending fragmentation of interest groups in Syria is something not to be ignored. As shown in Figure 4, the geographical overlapping at the territories once held by ISIS has already begun, with different stakeholders claiming territory following the eviction of ISIS: the Syrian government, rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Democratic Forces, jihadist groups such as the HST, Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, and other smaller jihadist outfits that now litter the region.

Fig. 4



Source: Stratfor⁸⁵

Further, post-ISIS, other major Salafist-Jihadist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham are thought to have already started planning their own islands of governance in the vacuums left behind. Al-Sham, at the time of this writing, was expected to announce its own “unified administration”, or in other words, territorial control covering “military, political, civil and judiciary”.⁸⁶ In other towns such as Idlib in northwestern Syria, smaller-jihadist factions including those aligned with Al-Qaeda have started warring amongst themselves for territorial and political control. According to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), Idlib is currently witnessing clashes between al-Sham and HTS, with the two jihadist factions vying for supremacy in the absence of both ISIS and the Syrian state.⁸⁷ Research conducted by the Combating Terrorism Center at Westpoint has found that as of June 2017, there have been 1,468 attacks in 16 cities in Iraq and Syria, since being liberated from ISIS rule.⁸⁸

Table 2: Attacks in Cities Post-Liberation


City	Country	Number of days Post-Liberation	Number of Attacks	Average Monthly Attacks	Reported Killed
Al-Sa`diyyah	Iraq	888	47	1.6	45
Baiji	Iraq	557	387	20.8	429
Falluja	Iraq	307	12	1.2	49
Hit	Iraq	381	37	2.9	80
Jalawla	Iraq	888	23	0.8	40
Jurf al-Sakhar	Iraq	917	1	0.0	0
Mosul's Left Side	Iraq	96	417	100.3	52
Ramadi	Iraq	449	163	10.9	335
Rutba	Iraq	345	38	3.3	212
Sinjar	Iraq	533	140	7.9	158
Tikrit	Iraq	761	63	2.5	115
`Azaz	Syria	1156	5	0.1	26
Jarabulus	Syria	249	2	0.2	0
Manbij	Syria	260	41	4.7	268
Palmyra	Syria	317	37	3.5	334
Shadabi	Syria	436	55	3.8	431

Source: CTC Westpoint⁸⁹

The Idlib’s current ideological and political struggle—where the people of the town have little say, if at all, in deciding their post-ISIS future—is not going to be a one-off example. The results of a post-ISIS cocktail of political vacuum, ideological infighting and historic sectarian divisions amongst the local populations and regional dynamics are already visible. In the absence of a state structure backed by the international order in both Syria and Iraq, the spread of Islamist groups beyond ISIS is, under current circumstances, inevitable. Other towns such as northern Hama and western Aleppo are witnessing a similar fate, with the underlying multiple-war fronts now taking mainstream precedence. For the people living in these regions, there is little change to expect in the post-ISIS era.

Even if ISIS’ hierarchy and territorial victories come to an end, it has given birth to enough branches to make sure that at least Syria, more than Iraq, remains systematically in an Islamist quagmire in the future, with little to no chance of consensus building between groups. In its potential

demise, ISIS is leaving enough political and societal chaos in Syria and Iraq for it to have a more than a fair chance to reemerge in a second attempt towards building its caliphate.

The above exercise, to draw out the Islamic State's history in order to understand its future, has highlighted that like many insurgency movements around the world, the Islamic State as an *idea* will persist. While this paper finds, with confidence, that territory was the defining factor that allowed ISIS ideology to flourish with such viciousness, the group's managerial tactics and ability to mobilise fighters and keeping them motivated was also a defining characteristic. Without these motivational strategies, as discussed in the sections on media propaganda, it would have been difficult for ISIS to hold on to their territory upto the extent it had managed to do so. Following the battle of Mosul, the expected trajectory of the Islamic State would perhaps witness a draw-down in Iraq while resuscitating guerilla warfare tactics in the future and expanding base even further in Syria despite the looming loss of Raqqa. However, ISIS' prospects are not going to be easy, as it could find itself battling multiple enemies—a resurgent Al-Qaeda, a vicious circle where the protégé will face-off with the master in what is expected to remain the most complex conflict in the world for the foreseeable future. What is next for the Iraqi and Syrian neighbourhoods becomes perilous as well. 

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org