3. The so-called Islamic State

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OVERVIEW

Origins (2003–2006)

The self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) – also referred to variously in the media as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and Daesh – is a militant Wahhabi-Salafi-jihadist organisation that operates largely in the regions of Iraq, Syria, Libya and beyond, and whose stated aim is the re-establishment of Sharia law under the Islamic ‘Caliphate’ of 7th-century Islam.¹ Ideologically speaking, the group is a proponent of its own, extreme and severely flawed interpretation of Muslim Sharia law, and it claims political and theological authority over all of the world’s Muslims (Jenkins, 2016). IS also believes in an apocalyptic ‘end of times’ prophecy as outlined in the Quran and sees itself as a vanguard element, duty-bound to bring about its occurrence by way of violent jihad (‘struggle’). Though the Islamic State finds its origins in the formation of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004 and the so-called Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in 2006, the formation of IS officially occurred in 2013 when its creation was announced by the group’s leader, cleric and self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. IS gained mainstream prominence primarily in 2014 by means of an aggressive world-wide social media campaign showing the violent beheadings of four captured Western journalists. This social media campaign, coupled with exceptionally rapid territorial gains and early military successes in Raqqa, Syria and Mosul, Iraq in June 2014 (signifying the official securing of territory for the establishment of the Caliphate), served to attract thousands of foreign fighters to IS’s ranks.

The so-called Islamic State’s de facto capital was in Raqqa, Syria, roughly from June 2014 to October 2017, and its estimated troop strength varied considerably depending on sources, as well as phases of conflict.² For instance, in the summer of 2016, US Lieutenant General Sean MacFarland estimated IS troop strength to be as low as 15 000 and as high as 20 000. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated IS troop strength to be around

80 000–100 000 in October 2014, and Reuters estimated troop strength to be somewhere between 40 000 to 60 000 in June 2015. The origins of IS can largely be traced back to the United States (US) military occupation of Iraq and the political destabilisation resulting from its subsequent exit. With the removal of Saddam Hussein from power in 2003 and the ‘de-Baathification’ of the Iraqi political and governmental apparatus, the US occupation of Iraq had the side-effect of disenfranchising a considerable number of Iraqi Sunnis while creating a sizable power vacuum.³ The establishment of US prisoner detainee camps in Iraq also had the unforeseen side-effect of creating hothouses allowing for radicalisation and bonding between prisoners who would later form the organisational backbone of IS.

With the establishment of the US-backed Maliki government, and the subsequent ‘Shia-fication’ of the Iraqi government, even more Iraqi Sunnis felt themselves being politically marginalised. Shortly after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2004, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian leader of the then jihadist group Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (the Group for Monotheism and Jihad), partnered with al-Qaeda (AQ) to form the franchise of AQI. The initial aim of AQI was to broadly target the Shia population in an attempt to draw the US into a protracted war in Iraq that would then function as a means of mobilising the remainder of the Iraqi-Sunni populace against the US military and the Maliki government. The relationship between AQ and Zarqawi soon became tenuous, however, as the groups began to differ over strategic and ideological aims. While both Osama bin Laden and Zarqawi believed in the inevitable coming of the Islamic Caliphate, Bin Laden felt that the scope of AQ’s military aims should be immediately focused on the far enemy (US and Western influences) while leaving the project of establishing the Caliphate for future Muslim generations.⁴ In 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden’s deputy, castigated AQI and Zarqawi for targeting Shias, on the grounds that doing so would cause many Sunnis to ally with the Iraq government. Bin Laden’s prediction was largely correct. Zarqawi was eventually killed in a US air strike in Baquba, Northern Baghdad in June 2006, when his safe-house location was uncovered through US intelligence.

Emergence and Expansion (2006–2015)

Shortly after Zarqawi’s death, Egyptian-born Abu Ayyub al-Masri assumed head leadership of AQI and re-branded the organisation as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006. Shortly before this time period, however, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was arrested, and detained in a US detention facility in Iraq from February to December 2004. He was incarcerated alongside many other disgruntled Sunnis and former Baathist members who were looking for ways to re-assert their political power, and these detention facilities became unin-

tended breeding grounds for radicalisation and future terrorist coordination. Following the deaths of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Hamza al-Baghdadi, prior ISI leaders, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assumed head leadership of ISI in 2010.

The US military exit from Iraq in 2011 lent itself to further political instability in the region as did the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011 which pitted Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Alawite ruling class against a variety of different rebel factions. These two events allowed ISI to further capitalise on disenfranchised Sunni sentiments. In 2011, Baghdadi sent AQ affiliate group al-Nusra Front into Syria to help consolidate and mobilise Sunni power in this region. Tensions between Baghdadi and al-Nusra's leadership, however, would later cause serious political infighting within the group.⁵ In 2013, Baghdadi announced the official re-branding of the ISI to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (IS/ISIL; but henceforth referred to as IS) and in 2014 he announced the official establishment of the Caliphate. This announcement, combined with early military successes in Mosul and Raqqa, caused a major influx of thousands of foreign fighters (from all over the world, but particularly from Europe) into the region to join IS's ranks. Within this same general time period, Zawahiri and AQ central announced their official break from IS and Baghdadi's nascent project (Jones, 2014).

Retraction (2015–2020)

In recent years, the international community has seen IS's territorial holdings and troop strength wane dramatically. Even as early as 2016, IS's troop strength was estimated to have begun dropping from somewhere between 20 000 and 30 000 troops down to 19 000–25 000 troops. Despite early territorial gains in Mosul, Iraq and Raqqa, Syria, 2017 and 2018 showed IS's incapacity to maintain sufficient military control of these regions as they were pushed back by US-led coalition forces. By the autumn of 2019, the successful US special forces raid which resulted in the death of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, along with the deaths of other key leaders, dealt a decisive blow to the fledgling organisation. The intelligence yield gained from this raid on Baghdadi caused a further diminishing and retraction of the organisation and its network. Lastly, the military contributions of local US-led coalition forces in Syria as well as Western-trained Iraqi forces further helped to wither IS's power base.

The retraction of IS since 2017 is not, however, a sign of IS becoming any less dangerous (Jones and Dobbins, 2017). Indeed, several counter-terrorism experts argue that a fracturing IS might be even more dangerous in the long run, insofar as the group could decentralise and metastatise into a multiplicity

of opportunist terrorist entities, leading to what experts refer to as ‘destructive terrorist competition’ (Watts, 2016). Lastly, as recently as the spring of 2020, IS appears to once again be actively conducting offensive military operations in both Iraq and Syria, exploiting the momentary lack of US and international prioritisation due to Covid-19, domestic issues of racial justice, and general international disunity (Hassan, 2020). This absence of US focus upon IS in Syria and Iraq at present could prove highly dangerous for both the US and the international counter-terrorism (CT) community in the long run, insofar as it gives IS leadership the time and opportunity to regenerate more effectively, having learned valuable military and strategic lessons from their earlier attempts from 2014 to 2017 (Hassan, 2020).

IDEOLOGY AND AIMS

Salafi-Jihadism

Broadly speaking, the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of IS can be explained in terms of a Salafi interpretation of Islam. The Salafis, meaning followers of the way of Muhammad and his companions, are adherents to a particularly strict Sunni interpretation of Islam (Holland, 2016). The core tenets of Salafism involve a strict interpretation of the Quran, a belief in a duty to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate and to institute Sharia law, and a belief in the coming of the end of times. Salafi-Islamists arguably split into three further sub-groups. First are the ‘passive, quietest’ Salafis who believe that the establishment of the Caliphate and the coming of the end of times will occur on its own, and thus they focus on self-purification rather than violent jihad. Next are the ‘politically active, non-violent’ Salafis who believe that the end of times needs to be nudged along, but not through violent means. Finally, there are the ‘violent vanguard’ Salafis who believe that the end of times can only be brought about through the use of violence. IS arguably fits into this last sub-category.

Since Salafism preaches a strict interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith (a record of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, perceived as a major source of religious and moral law for Muslims, second only to the authority of the Quran), it views all Shia Muslims as apostates and punishable by death, in virtue of their reformist or revisionist interpretation of the Quran and their reluctance to officially pledge *bayaan* (‘allegiance’) to the Caliphate. Salafis therefore see Shia Muslims fundamentally as traitors, including them in the ‘near enemy’ category. Salafis contrast this with the ‘far enemy’, that is, non-Muslims, Christians, ‘the forces of Rome’, and so on. Salafis regard non-Muslims – and potentially non-Salafi Muslims – as *jahil* (or ‘ignorant’): either being culpably ignorant, and therefore punishable, or non-culpably igno-

rant, and therefore non-punishable and thus able to attain salvation, depending upon the individual's exposure to, and reasonable chance of understanding, the Quran (Wood, 2015). Salafism arguably provides the broad ideological backdrop for both AQ and IS.

Wahhabism

More precisely, the presuppositions of not just Salafism but Wahhabism in particular provide much of the ideological motivations for IS specifically, whereas AQ is arguably more of an ideological expression of the writings of Sayyid Qutb, Osama Bin Laden's mentor and intellectual predecessor. Wahhabism is originally a Sunni, Salafi ideology which has become one of the defining characteristics of the Saudi identity, highlighted by Ibn Saud, who was a Bedouin tribe leader in the poor desert area of Nejd. Muhammad Ibn Abdel Wahhab (1703–1792) is considered the founding father of Wahhabism. He was a scholar of Islamic law and theology in Mecca and Medina. He denounced many popular beliefs and practices as un-Islamic idolatry and a revival of pagan pre-Islamic Arabia, a period described as 'Jahilyya' or ignorance. He was against blind imitation or past scholarship and regarded medieval law of the religious scholars (*ulama*) as fallible and sometimes, unwarranted innovations (*bid'a*). Wahhabism was used by Ibn Saud to legitimate his jihad to subdue and unite the tribes of Arabia and to convert them to the pure version of Islam (Crooke, 2014). Similar to the earlier Salafi thinker Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Abdel Wahhab believed that the period of the Prophet Muhammad's stay in Medina was the ideal Muslim society, which all Muslims should try to emulate, and this is the essence of Salafism. Ibn Taymiyyah had declared war on Shi'ism, Sufism and Greek philosophy. He also criticised visiting the grave of the Prophet and celebrating his birthday as imitating Christian worship of Jesus as God. Lastly, Ibn Taymiyyah introduced the conceptual distinction between Dar al-Islam ('the house of Islam') and Dar al-Kufr ('the house of unbelievers'), whereby Sharia law was imposed on the former. Ibn Abdel Wahhab assimilated all of these earlier teachings, stating that 'any doubt or hesitation' on the part of a believer in respect to their acknowledging this particular interpretation of Islam should 'deprive a man of immunity of his property and his life' (Crooke, 2014).⁶

The Caliphate

The intermediary phase in the Salafi grand narrative, between now and the end of times, is the establishment of the Caliphate. The succession of the Caliphate, however, is riven with disagreements and conflicting viewpoints which in their own way are mirrored in the Sunni–Shia schism that was cemented after the

Battle of Karbala in AD 680 which resulted in the death of Hussein ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib (a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad), and Hussein's family. Even the Ottoman caliphs were not universally accepted or recognised as caliphs in some parts of the Muslim world during their tenure, as they were not direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad or his tribe, the Quraysh. The Ottoman Caliphate was finally abolished by Kemal Attaturk in 1924, but even at that stage there were those who considered the real Caliphate to have ended following the fall of the Abbasid-controlled city of Baghdad to Mongol invaders in AD 1258.

For the Caliphate to be officially established requires two things, at least according to IS: (1) territorial control of the lands prophesied in the Quran; and (2) leadership under the legitimate caliph. Once these two criteria are met, the ideologies of both AQ and IS believe that all Muslims then become duty-bound to travel to the Caliphate and to live under Sharia law. According to the Salafi interpretation of the Quran, it is considered sinful for vigilantes to begin enacting Sharia law only partially (such as the severing of the hands of thieves) prior to the legitimate establishment of the Caliphate (Wood, 2015). Consequently, the practicing of certain violent elements of Sharia law only makes sense, according to Salafis, when understood as a total package of social practices coordinated under the Caliphate (that is, when also coupled with free medical care, for instance). This is why many Salafis have openly criticised Saudi Arabia for its seemingly partial implementation of only certain elements of Sharia law in the absence of the legitimate Caliphate. By definition, the concept of the Caliphate precludes the acknowledgement of any existing state borders or boundaries within its scope. Similarly, seeking official recognition from the United Nations for legitimacy would, according to Salafi doctrine, be considered sinful, as it would count as an instance of polytheism (Wood, 2015).

In addition to territorial control of the lands prophesied in the Quran, Salafism stipulates that the Caliphate cannot officially begin unless the leader over this territory satisfies the necessary requirements for being caliph. Salafism also stipulates that in order for one to become caliph, one must demonstrate physical and mental integrity, leadership authority, sufficient knowledge of Islamic learning, and be a descendant from the tribe of the Prophet, the Quraysh. Once caliph, one is duty-bound to continually wage war on behalf of the spreading of Islam, and under no circumstances may the caliph lose the territory of the Caliphate (Wood, 2015).

The Apocalypse

While Muslims believe in the prophesies of Muhammad, to include the prophecy of the end of times, members of the Islamic State specifically see

themselves as active participants in this prophecy, duty-bound to bring about its occurrence in their own lifetime. This notion of the impending imminence of the apocalypse therefore considerably distinguishes IS from AQ insofar as the latter sees the end of times as preordained but in the distant rather than near future. The prophetic, end of times narrative tells of the Mahdi, the messianic leader of the Muslims who will appear to lead them in battle against the ‘forces of Rome’, led by the anti-Christ, Dajjal. The prophesy states that this epic, final battle between Good and Evil will occur on the fields of Dabiq near Aleppo, Syria and that the forces of Islam will diminish to only 5000 in number until they are cornered by Dajjal in Jerusalem. Just as the army of Good is about to be defeated, the prophesy foretells that Jesus will return to earth and kill Dajjal and lead the Muslims to victory (Wood, 2015).

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

Governmental Bodies

The leadership and organisational structure of IS can be explained as follows. Prior to his death in October of 2019 at the hands of US Special Forces, IS was led by their commander-in-chief/caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Baghdadi was an Iraqi national from the Al-Bu Badri tribe and claimed descendancy from the Prophet Muhammad, one of the necessary conditions for being caliph (McCants, 2016). Baghdadi received his PhD in Islamic Studies shortly before founding the Jamaat Jaish Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaa in order to fight US forces in 2003. He was detained by US forces at Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca for most of 2004, and assumed leadership of ISI before its expansion and re-branding to IS/ISIL in 2013. He was the self-appointed and self-declared ‘caliph’ until he killed himself and two of his children by detonating an explosive vest when cornered by US Special Forces in a US-led raid in October 2019 (Lister, 2014). Baghdadi has since been replaced by Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi (aka Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi) as IS’s new figurehead (Chulov, 2020).

Directly beneath the caliph within the IS organisational hierarchy are several deputies, cabinets and councils. One senior deputy to the caliph is Abu Muslim Al-Turkmani, former Lieutenant Colonel in the Iraqi Army and officer in the Iraqi Special Forces. A second deputy was Abu Ali Anbari, former Governor in charge of the IS-controlled areas of Syria. He was, however, killed on 25 March 2016, and his replacement is currently unknown. Assisting in an advisory capacity to the caliph are both the official IS Cabinet and the Shura Council. The IS Cabinet is made up of Abu Abdul Kadr, Abu Louy, Abu Salah, Abu Hajar al-Assafi, Abu Kassem, Abu Abdul Rahman and Al-Bilawi, Abu Bakr’s self-appointed team of advisors (Taylor, 2014). The Shura Council is

headed by Abu Arkan al-Ameri. This Council is supposed to include 9–11 members and all members are personally selected by the caliph. Theoretically, this Council can depose the caliph, but only in exceptional circumstances. The main task of the Council is the supervising of affairs of the state.

The caliph is also supported by the Military Council/War Office consisting of Abu Shema, Abu Suja and Abu Kifa. The main task of these three members is to plan and supervise the military commanders and the actual military operations of IS in the field. The members of the military council are all appointed personally by the caliph. The caliph is also supported by the Judicial Authority, headed by Abu Mohammad al-Ani. The Judicial Authority deals with all judicial issues as well as spreading the message of IS by means of recruitment and preaching. Lastly, the caliph is further supported by the Defense, Security and Intelligence Council as well as the Islamic State Institution for Public Information. The Defense, Security and Intelligence Council is responsible for the personal security and safety of the caliph, and serves to implement orders, campaigns, judicial decisions and collect and disseminate intelligence. The Islamic State Institution for Public Information, headed by Abu al-Athir Omru al-Abbassi, concerns internal information dissemination for the Caliphate (Taylor, 2014).

Evidence suggests that even if key leadership of IS are killed, the system has created a succession procedure designed to allow it to survive, just like AQ was able to survive even after the killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 (Stanford University, 2019). IS's massive loss of territory and fighting strength since 2017, however, suggests that even succession planning could not halt its eventual decline.

Military

IS troop strength estimates have varied significantly, with estimates ranging from 15 000 to as high as 100 000, with average estimates usually being somewhere around 20 000–40 000 troops, around 12 000 of whom were assessed to be foreign fighters. Analysis of IS's military demographics suggest that the average IS soldier is male, 26, single, reasonably well educated but not an expert on the Quran. Regional fighters from Syria and Iraq round out the remainder of IS's ranks, with many of these fighters coming from Iraq's disbanded Saddam-era guerrilla group the Fedayeen Saddam, possessing over a decade's worth of insurgency fighting skills in Iraq, and with a few older veterans even having served in the mujahideen against the Russians in Afghanistan.⁷

Domestic and Political

The territorial areas which IS annexed and controlled in order to nullify national boundaries are known individually as *wilayah* (that is, a province). *Wilayat* temporarily established by IS in both Syria and Iraq reportedly had governing authorities that included legal, judicial, educational and propagandistic structures (Al-Tamimi, 2018). These areas also had relatively functioning municipal agencies such as police, firefighters, water and sanitation agencies, as well as 57 media production units and propaganda offices, including the IS Amaq News Agency (Winter and Clarke, 2017).

At its height in 2014–2015, IS was able to establish quasi-state functionality not unlike functionality comparable to Hezbollah. Within Raqqa, in particular, reports of day-to-day life within the Caliphate suggested a combination of social cohesion, domestic governance and extreme brutality for its approximately 300 000 inhabitants. Despite its detractors and critics, IS was able to establish and implement a domestic governance structure capable of such things as raising taxes, conscripting soldiers and regulating rents (Cockburn, 2015). Furthermore, a Sharia Board of Authority was created to resolve local problems and disputes, and a consumer protection office was established in order to regulate the health and safety of local restaurants and food distributors. Despite these efficiencies, many people within Raqqa still reported frequent lack of water, electricity and fuel as well as limited access to mobile and satellite communications within the Caliphate.

Domestically speaking, reports from within the Caliphate suggested that public displays of religiosity increased considerably, with men growing out their beards and shops and marketplaces shutting down during the day for daily prayer. Furthermore, local school and university curriculums within the Caliphate were also drastically overhauled, removing all literature, philosophy, social and law studies incompatible with IS's strict teachings. Lastly, the behaviours of everyday men and women within the city were highly regulated in strict accordance with Sharia law. The Hisbih Brigade, for men, and the Khansa Brigade, for women, provided round-the-clock enforcement of strict Sharia law within the city. Women in particular were expected to cover themselves from head to toe, and to not leave the house without a male escort. Many women dropped out of school or university entirely (Smith and Balkiz, 2014).

Such social coherence and governance within Raqqa was made possible largely in part due to the strict and brutal implementation of 7th century Sharia practices found within the Caliphate. Failure to abide by Sharia rules resulted in a minimum of 40 lashes for most offences. More severe punishments such as beheadings, crucifixions and amputations were also commonplace. Lastly, persons deemed to be pagans, such as the Yazidis, were brought into the city and sold as chattel slaves. Obedience within the Caliphate was made further

possible, according to some experts, by many citizens' poor understanding of Islamic law and legislation. According to one undercover informant; 'the support [for ISIS] came from people whose knowledge of Islamic legislation is weak ... Those people think that what they see – what ISIS is doing – is implementation of Shariah' (Smith and Balkiz, 2014).

Affiliates and Adherents

IS has claimed affiliate groups in Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Algeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Tunisia and North Caucasus. External organisations such as AQ and Boko Haram have similarly pledged varying degrees of support and affiliation to IS at different times, depending upon key leadership. IS is estimated, by some reports, to have up to 42 million sympathisers in the Muslim world (Anderson, 2016).

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Recruitment Demographics

As reporter Heather Long notes, George Washington University and Brookings put together a metadata analysis report on IS recruits (Long, 2015). Their top findings suggest that the average IS recruit is predominantly in their twenties, predominantly male, and is middle or upper class. Brookings findings also suggest that IS recruits are often second- or third-generation Muslim immigrants. In terms of their internet and social media behavior, Brookings found that most recruits do not like taking selfie pictures, are more likely to use Android phones, and are more active on Twitter than average. Lastly, Brookings report found that many IS recruits were motivated by a passion to travel abroad (Long, 2015).

Recruitment Methods

An article in the October 2015 edition of West Point's *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* (Berger, 2015) breaks down the following five-stage template for online recruiting, which IS implements in different ways depending on the target's disposition and circumstances. The first stage of this recruitment template is the 'discovery' phase where a member of IS discovers a potential recruit, or a potential recruit discovers IS. The second stage of the recruitment process is the creation of a 'micro-community' where IS supporters flock around potential recruits to surround them with social input. The third stage is the 'isolation' phase where potential recruits are encouraged to cut ties with mainstream influences, such as their families, friends and local religious

communities. The fourth stage is a 'shift to private communications' stage where IS supporters encourage targets to take their conversations about IS into private or encrypted messaging platforms. And the last stage is the 'identify and encourage action' stage where IS supporters probe to figure out what the target is most likely to do (usually travel to join IS, or carry out terrorist attacks at home) and then encourage the target to take concrete action (Berger, 2015).

IS's recruitment success, both locally and worldwide, can largely be traced to its keen ability to combine social media dissemination with various Salafi and Wahhabi grand narratives. These include heroic self-sacrifice and righteous struggle as a way to capture the imaginations of mainly disenfranchised young men (for example, Sunnis at home, second-generation Muslims in the West) and to leverage this general sentiment towards the realisation of its violent, ideological ends. Furthermore, IS's use of spectacular atrocities, such as the beheading of Western journalists on film and disseminated on social media, function as the first 'click bait'-style entry point into the IS advertising funnel and overall IS informational ecosystem. From there, more robust articulations of IS ideology (and Salafi and Wahhabi ideology more generally) can be found in online chatrooms, over Twitter and YouTube, and in IS's online magazines, *Inspire* and *Dabiq*. Given the Salafi grand narrative and the supposed duty for all Muslims to travel to the Caliphate once it is restored, and to live under the rule of the caliph, IS's greatest recruitment tool (and accordingly, its greatest Achilles heel) came down to the social media broadcasting of its increased territorial and positional success. The influx of thousands of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq in 2014 after early IS positional successes in Raqqa and Mosul added weight and testament to this claim.

Training

While the specifics of IS training are not fully clarified, some general trends can nonetheless be gleaned from various US intelligence reports. According to one report, new recruit training ranged from anywhere between two weeks and one year. Training content involved a mix of military tactics and methods as well as political indoctrination and Sharia law instruction. During this time period, recruits could be dispatched to military checkpoints but not to front-line combat. Upon graduation, recruits remained under supervision and could be expelled or punished in cases of non-compliance. Recruits struggling to accept the group's message and methods could be sent back to receive remedial training to 'strengthen' their faith and skills competence. Some reports indicated that IS went to great lengths to indoctrinate and mobilise child soldiers, either as suicide martyrs or for social media propaganda purposes. For example, the rate of young people dying in suicide operations rose from six in January 2015 to 11 in January 2016. The rate of operations involving one or more children or

youth likewise increased. The CTC reports that there were three times as many suicide operations involving children in January 2016 as in January 2015.

FINANCING

Sources of Funding

Technically speaking, IS at its height was the richest terrorist organisation in history, with its financial assets estimated to be somewhere around \$2 billion. IS's financial base came from a variety of self-generative sources, mainly through the trade of vital oil and gas resources (with an estimated £1.8 million a day revenue), taxation of its local populace (an estimated £900 million per year), illegal drug-trafficking (with revenue estimates as high as \$1 billion per year) and through looting of captured territories. In the 2014 capture of Mosul, for instance, IS acquired an estimated £240 million worth of currency from Iraqi banks. In addition to these two main sources of income, IS gained additional financial resources from a variety of other tertiary sources, namely from extortion of local businesses and local agriculture, taxation of Christian communities, human trafficking, drug trafficking particularly from Afghanistan, ransom from hostages, the black market sale of cultural artifacts, and from charitable fronts and fundraising (Bahney, 2015).

Funds derived from the extortion of local businesses and agriculture were estimated to be around £5 million per month, while ransoms from hostage-taking were assessed at around £3 million per hostage, with an estimated £40 million gained in hostage-taking in 2014 alone. Human trafficking revenue was believed to generate around £10 000–£15 000 per person, with about 7000 women and children (mainly Turkish Yazidis) kidnapped and sold as of late December 2015. The black market sale of cultural artifacts further raised around £200 million per year.

In addition to these self-generative means of revenue generation, IS has also relied on external funders and donors. Specifically, IS has used fraudulent charitable fronts as well as so-called 'combat charities' to serve as a source of external revenue (FATF, 2015). Furthermore, especially in their early stages, IS relied upon donor contributions from wealthy Gulf State angel investors to further fund its operation (Windrem, 2014).

MOVEMENT AND USE OF FUNDS AND ASSETS

Financial Institutions

While IS secured access to many financial institutions in both Iraq and Syria, the Iraqi government and the US Department of Treasury took aggressive steps

to block IS's access to the international financial system at large. According to one industry report, as of 2015, approximately 90 Iraqi bank branches were located in territories held or contested by IS. In an attempt to prohibit IS from exploiting Iraq bank access, the bank headquarters of the Mosul Development Bank moved its centre of operations to Baghdad. With respect to financial institutions in Syria, more than 20 Syrian financial institutions operated in locations under Iraqi control. These included the Central Bank of Syria, the Commercial Bank of Syria and the Syria International Islamic Bank. The US Treasury and the European Union has designated these banks as being connected with IS, thereby causing most major international financial institutions to officially sever ties with them (FATF, 2015).

ALTERNATIVE MONEY/VALUE TRANSFER SERVICES (MVTs)

In addition to formal financial banking channels, IS also uses a variety of alternative money/value transfer services. These financial services, which are far less regulated and institutionally surveilled than standard means and methods, rely on trusted brokers who do not use wire-transfers as banks do, but who send messages via email, phone, text, fax, and so on to local or foreign affiliates to receive or send money for a given counterpart. The money/value transfers then settle payments at a later date. This system, known as hawala, originates from 8th century Islamic trade, and involves coordination between four key parties: a money/value sender, a pair of trusted hawaladors (hawala brokers who act as the middlemen), and a money/value receiver. The customer gives a hawalador in one city a sum of money (or a valuable commodity) along with instructions for receipt (usually a password). The hawala broker then sends the money to his hawala counterpart in another city, while the customer calls or emails the receiver in the receiving city with the instructions or password. The receiver then approaches the hawalador on the receiving end and gives him the password along with a small commission, and the hawalador pays the receiver the agreed-upon transferred amount. In addition to MVTs, IS has also been known to use cruder methods of value transfer such as physical smuggling of cash and gold across national borders such as Turkey (FATF, 2015).

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT, EXPENDITURE AND 'BURN RATE'

While IS's monetary gains are quite significant, its rapid expansion, in terms of both troop strength and territorial control, necessarily entailed a marked increase in spending on such things as food, water and electricity for the local population. According to one report, IS paid its troops an average of

\$350–\$500 per month. With an estimated 20 000–30 000 fighters, IS would spend roughly \$10 million per month on this expense. IS also marshalled its financial resources to make significant infrastructural overhauls, such as dam repairs, the restoration of stalled generators and the upgrading of power plants and oil refineries in an attempt to increase the quality of life for its population and to bolster popular opinion. Since much of IS's funding was contingent upon its ability to refine and transport oil, military defeats and setbacks or stalled efforts to expand necessarily entailed further spending to recoup losses. Such territorial and positional losses have therefore prompted IS to reconsolidate its stronghold areas in Libya in recent years (Snow, 2019), particularly in Sirte, nicknamed by jihadists as 'Raqqa by the Sea'.

STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Conceptual Frameworks

In order to properly understand IS's specific military and strategic actions, it is helpful to understand the broader military distinction between strategic, operational and tactical levels of combat. The strategic level of combat concerns the macro-level coordination of persons, resources and information over time and space for the purpose of achieving the group's ultimate political and ideological end. The operational level involves the translation of strategic ends into real-world tactical actions. And the tactical level concerns the bringing about of specific causal actions or events in the world, in service of strategic ends. As Jeff McCausland, former Dean of the Army War College, keenly points out, terrorism – that is, the use of violence against innocents for the purposes of achieving some ideological and/or political end – is fundamentally a tactic and not a strategy. Hence, the entire notion of a counter-terrorism 'strategy' is something of a misnomer.

Strategy

Given the distinction between strategy, operations and tactics, the overall strategy that IS employed can arguably be described as a combination of Maoist protracted warfare doctrine and Guevaran 'focalism' doctrine, and it is useful at this point to briefly describe these doctrines to understand how they are relevant to the approach that IS has taken. Maoist protracted warfare doctrine conceives of revolutionary warfare as having three distinction phases: phase 1 is insurgency fighting, phase 2 is positional and phase 3 is the conventional offensive. The goal of a successful revolutionary effort, according to Mao Tse Tung, should be to move from non-conventional, small-unit insurgency fighting, to the securing of physical, geographic positional gains, to the

marshalling of a conventional force towards offensive fighting and ultimate military success. Depending on circumstances, a successful revolutionary effort constantly shifts back and forth between these three successive phases. If the revolutionary effort faces defeat at the conventional offensive phase, then it will fall back to secure its positional assets. If the military force loses at the positional phase, then it will shift back to decentralised insurgency tactics until a more favourable opportunity presents itself whereby it may regain those positional assets and, from there, move to conventional offensive fighting once again. Maoist protracted warfare doctrine is therefore a long-game strategy, one aimed not so much on winning as on not losing until the opponent's will is broken through mere attrition.

Expanding on Mao's protracted warfare notion, the South American revolutionary Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's 'focalist' doctrine can be seen as uniquely innovative in that it reconceives the Clausewitzian 'centre of gravity' as not being fundamentally located in the physical destruction of the enemy's army or its state capital's infrastructure, but in social symbols of power.⁸ Put another way, Guevara arguably was the first theorist to really latch on to the idea of violence as fundamentally communicative (Guevara, 1963).

These two doctrines clearly permeate IS's military thinking, as demonstrated by its deliberate strategic advances and retreats in Mosul, by its battles against Kurdish forces and by its spectacular atrocities, cleverly broadcasted and distributed throughout social media. Unlike other opponents whose strategic ends may be somewhat of a mystery, given the fatalistic grand narrative that IS sees itself as duty-bound to bring to fruition, IS's strategic ends are arguably fairly clear: to advance along the three Maoist phases until their conventional forces are strong enough to defeat the 'near enemy', to use these local victories against the near enemy as well as its social media presence to recruit Muslims to the Caliphate, and to bait the 'far enemy' (aka the 'forces of Rome') into a protracted, 'boots on the ground' conflict in their Muslim homeland as prophesied by the Quran that IS sees itself as divinely preordained to ultimately win (Whiteside, 2016).

Tactics

All this being said, we can now better understand how specific military tactics were meant to feed into IS's higher strategic aims and ideological ends. Consequently, some of these tactics will include so-called terror tactics, but not all. For instance, when fighting against Kurdish forces, IS employed more insurgency-based tactics than terror tactics, such as the use of surveillance drones, improvised explosive devices, snipers and booby-trapped buildings utilised against combatants rather than civilians. Furthermore, in moments of battle in Mosul and Aleppo, IS demonstrated more conventional tactics

through the deployment of tanks, armored personnel carriers, fixed artillery and mortars.

With respect to IS insurgency tactics from August 2014 onward, the overall ‘active defence’ style that IS has employed is more reminiscent of Nazi Germany circa 1944–1945. Indeed, even in retreat, IS was extremely aggressive and highly dangerous, tactically speaking, through the use of snipers, mobile shooter teams, improvised explosive devises (IEDs) and mobile platoons making good use of the night and early morning to achieve area denial versus last-stand defence. Several counter-terrorism experts have argued, however, that IS’s aggressive active-defensive posture at the tactical level has been deleterious, insofar as it has strained and stretched operational coordination and the logistical re-supply of troops and equipment, and also resulted in the continual strategic loss of physical territory. Arguably though, when utilised correctly, such a tactic hedges on a conscious bid to trade positional losses for spectacular and highly visible and violent tactical successes, as a demonstration of strength and ostensibly for future recruitment replenishment (Ingram, 2016).

With respect to terror tactics specifically, IS has inextricably linked these to its exploitation of the recent advent of social media. The group’s use of video-based social media, such as YouTube, arguably serves two main purposes. By its use of highly orchestrated, slickly filmed atrocities (such as the beheading of high-profile Western journalists, the burning of a Jordanian pilot in a cage, the tossing of an alleged homosexual man off of a building, or the mass execution of dozens of innocents), IS’s social media campaign serves as both terror propaganda as well as an effective recruitment tool for adherents and sympathisers. The specific atrocity acts that IS carried out served an additional signalling and communicative purpose to potential recruits, insofar as they are consistent with a strict Salafi interpretation of both the Quran and of Sharia-based punishments.

In addition to its exploitation of video-based social media, IS has made effective use of Twitter as a means of propaganda, information dissemination and recruitment around the world as well. This reliance of IS upon such cutting-edge social media technology is at least somewhat noteworthy since a strict Salafist-Wahhabist interpretation of the Quran would arguably denote such technologies as *bidaa* (‘innovation’) and therefore technically mark them as forbidden. Hence, members of IS, by their own ideological commitments, are arguably doing something sinful, hypocritical and self-defeating by promoting a Salafist-Wahhabist message by means of a forbidden technological medium.⁹

Lastly, terrorist Anwar al-Awlaki’s promotion of the conception of ‘open source jihad’ via the vehicles of the *Inspire* online magazine and *Inspire* videos (which provide do-it-yourself instructions for bomb-making and other terror

tactics, plus encouragement for Western sympathisers to conduct jihad on their own) further harnesses anti-Western sympathies around the world and converts them into a powerful symbolic gesture of violence furthering IS's overall cause. These do-it-yourself terror tactics in recent years have specifically taken the form of homemade IEDs, mass shootings, stabbings, vehicular attacks on pedestrians and suicide bombings, all intentionally directed primarily at 'soft targets' such as social spaces and institutions.

FUTURE FORECASTING

While IS, in recent years, has lacked the military successes, international prestige and institutional momentum that it demonstrated in its heyday of 2014–2015, the terrorist organisation and its network is far from finished. Indeed, IS in its future form will likely continue to provide a serious threat to the US and the greater international community for years to come. While precise predictions about the organisation's future are impossible to make, theoreticians and practitioners can at least look to several salient points for general future forecasting. These salient points include: (1) re-branding efforts; (2) relationship to AQ; (3) territorial control (of Iraq and Syria, and to a lesser degree Libya and Africa); and (4) new leadership. These issues are now investigated in turn.

Re-Branding

Firstly, counter-terrorism practitioners can reasonably expect IS in the coming years to re-brand and change up its overall messaging and recruitment tactics, having learned key lessons since 2014. Despite its early branding and recruitment successes in 2014, largely motivated by the hypothetical idea of the establishment of the Caliphate, one of IS's biggest branding hurdles for the future will be the many disparaging reports and stories of the reality of what the Caliphate actually looked like in practice. Indeed, far from the idyllic and romantic vision of the Caliphate promised to many foreign fighters and Muslim families, many foreign recruits into the Caliphate came to discover its non-idyllic reality: harsh living conditions, abuse of women, and so on (Dandois, 2019). Accordingly, future IS re-branding efforts will no longer be able to as easily leverage such hopeful and romantic idealisations of the Caliphate when contrasted against the narratives and reports of its suboptimal application and governance in practice.

Relationship to AQ

Closely related to IS's future re-branding efforts is its ongoing relationship to AQ. Indeed, as IS's closest ideological competitor, AQ and IS are essentially fighting for dominance and control over the future vision of Salafi jihadism not only in the Middle East but in the world at large for years to come. The degree to which AQ and IS leadership are willing to cooperate versus compete with one another will have a direct bearing on IS's future ideological messaging, its ability to attract future recruits, its ability to retain and motivate existing members, its ability to garner future funding and donor support, and its military and strategic prioritisation. IS's ability to successfully cooperate or compete with AQ will also likely determine whether IS's organisational integrity will remain intact or whether the organisation will fracture and metastasise into a new set of sub-organisations (Byman and Williams, 2015).

Territorial Control

As per its stated mission and purpose commensurate with Quranic prophecy, IS's clear military objective is a territorial one: the re-capturing and re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate in the areas of Syria and Iraq. Accordingly, the US and international CT community can likely anticipate IS focusing its efforts on this territorial priority (as opposed to focusing its efforts on prioritising attacks on the 'far enemy' of the West). This, however, is not to rule out the idea that IS could not utilise attacks against the West on Western soil in service of this territorial objective. What is more, such a territorial end-state does not preclude IS attempting to consolidate a power base outside of just Syria and Iraq. Indeed, as noted briefly before, recent reports suggest that IS has begun to re-consolidate much of the remnants of its fractured network in Libya as well as in regions of Western Africa.

Leadership

A final consideration relevant to the future of IS will be its future leadership, particularly the leadership decision-making and ability of al-Baghdadi's replacement, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. Indeed, somewhat of al-Baghdadi's leadership appeal was that he was the original founder and implementer of IS. Hence, somewhat of a cult of personality had built up around him. His death at the hands of US Special Forces in 2019 has arguably made him somewhat of a martyr now within IS's ranks, hence leaving al-Qurashi with big institutional shoes to fill. Given the highly centralised and hierarchical command structure of IS, much of IS's future recruitment and branding efforts, relationship to AQ,

retention and organisational integrity, and future strategic prioritisation will likely turn on al-Qurashi's leadership decision-making.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the phenomenon of IS represents the latest instantiation in recent years of a more pernicious, enduring and underlying meme of Salafi-Wahhabi-jihadism more generally. While the positional, material, leadership, and troop strength of IS has waned dramatically in recent years, especially after the killing of its former leader, al-Baghdadi, and its huge territorial losses in Syria and Iraq, recent consolidation efforts in Libya as well as recent military attacks in both Iraq and Syria during this time of general international disunity suggest that IS is far from permanently defeated. Such recent offensive military activity in Iraq and Syria further suggests that IS will likely regenerate in some new and strengthened form having learned, adjusted and adapted from its earlier military and strategic losses. Accordingly, it is important for members of the US and international CT community to remember and keep in mind that the 'battle-space' of the war on terror is fundamentally to be located in the hearts and minds of individuals, and that the nature of the war itself is primarily an ideological rather than a physical one. Accordingly, the US and international CT community must not only be on guard against the metastasising of the remnants of IS into some other form, or the absorption of such remnants back into AQ, but it must also make a more active effort in propping up more peaceful and moderate versions of Islam and showcasing the liberal democratic values that the CT communities are ostensibly fighting for.

NOTES

1. Recent reports, however, have also shown increased IS activity within Africa. For instance, a recent United Nations report suggests that IS has begun operating in the areas of West Africa as of late. For details on this development, see: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/islamic-state-west-africa-province-iswap-0>.
2. As of 2020, the so-called capital of IS has relocated to Sirte in Libya, as detailed in this chapter.
3. For a more comprehensive exploration of the de-Baathification process and the resulting power vacuum, see this book's Chapter 7 on Iraq as a zone of conflict.
4. In 2001, Bin Laden and Zawahiri planned to establish the Caliphate in around 2013–2016 as part of their 20-year plan. This is covered in more detail in this book's Chapter 2 on al-Qaeda.
5. Al-Nusra's official connections to AQ and IS are somewhat hazy. While it appeared to announce its official separation from AQ and IS in 2016, several US, United Kingdom and Australian sources still regard it as closely institutionally linked. For a more lengthy explanation of this connection, see: <https://www>

- .nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Jabhat-Fatah-al-Sham.aspx.
6. For more detail on the theological history of Ibn Saud and Abd al-Wahhab, see Chapter 2 on al-Qaeda in this volume.
 7. For more information on the Fedayeen Saddam, see this book's Chapter 7 on Iraq as a zone of conflict.
 8. Clausewitz's concept of centre of gravity focuses on the idea that there are certain metaphysically salient loci of strength that can be targeted in order to defeat an enemy, a political community and its military. Clausewitz located the centre of gravity of an enemy's force in its physical army and in the will of its people and leadership. For a thorough explanation of centre of gravity, see Strange and Iron (1943, pp. 1–17).
 9. For a more thorough treatment of this ideological tension involving IS's use of modern social media technology, see Klausen (2014).

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