



THE ISLAMIC STATE

Quick Facts

Geographical Areas of Operation: East Asia, Eurasia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, North America, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa

Strength: Estimates suggest between 11,000 and 18,000, including several thousand foreign terrorist fightersc (*These estimates only reflect membership in Syria and Iraq*)

Leadership: Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi, also known as Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Quick Facts courtesy of the U.S. State Department's Annual Country Reports on Terrorism (2019)

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State (IS) is a Salafi influenced Islamist militant faction that traces its origins to founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 1999. In the two-plus decades since, the movement has grown in size and influence while absorbing dozens of smaller groups.

IS seeks to recreate the caliphate in the Levant region. This caliphate would be run according to the group's Salafi interpretation of Islam, with particular attention to what it calls the "Prophetic method" – ways in which the group claims first generations of Islam were governed. The group has drifted in and out of the al-Qaeda network and is currently its chief rival for supremacy of the global jihadi movement. The establishment of a proto-state, however temporary, inspired other like-minded jihadi groups around the world. IS claims official provinces beyond its core in Iraq and Syria including Khorasan (Afghanistan/Pakistan/Central Asia), Algeria, the Caucasus, Egypt, Libya, Western Africa, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and works with aspiring affiliates in Bangladesh and East Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines). The temporary success of IS was the result of a combination of many events, personalities, and external factors that attracted other jihadi groups and otherwise passive supporters.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Ahmed Fadeel al- Khalayleh, better known as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was born in 1966 in the small Jordanian town of Al-Zarqa. Zarqawi was imprisoned as a young man for sexual assault and became more religious during his imprisonment.¹ Following his release from jail in 1989, he traveled to Afghanistan to join the *jihad* against the Soviets. However, he arrived too late and the war was already ending. He then worked as a journalist for a few years, writing about the *mujahedeen*, before returning to Jordan, intent on undermining the monarchy. He planned terrorist attacks against Jordan and Israel, but these were quickly exposed, and he was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in jail in 1994. In jail, Zarqawi lifted weights, memorized Quranic verses, and built a network using the strength of his charismatic personality.² When

Zarqawi was unexpectedly released due to a general amnesty in 1999, he made his way back to Afghanistan where he was hosted and supported by an al-Qaeda network interested in recruiting him.³ Settling near the western city of Herat, Zarqawi built up a small group of *jihadists* from around the Levant. The 2001 American invasion of Afghanistan disrupted his bucolic commune, and Zarqawi escaped through Iran and settled in the autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq.

Zarqawi took refuge with the al-Qaeda affiliated group Ansar al-Islam, a Kurdish-based Salafi militant group. He saw Kurdistan as a base of operations to begin working in other areas of Iraq and possibly in his home country. Zarqawi initially directed his efforts at toppling the Jordanian regime with plans to use his home country as a base to undermine the rest of what he determined were “apostate” Arab regimes.⁴ With the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Zarqawi saw in the Iraqi scene a new land of *jihad* and began formulating a new strategy, focusing his growing network’s efforts in Iraq. He debuted the group’s terror campaign in the late summer of 2003 with massive truck bombs targeting the UN headquarters, the Jordanian embassy, and the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf. This last attack, executed by Zarqawi’s father-in-law, killed the most prominent Shi’a cleric in Iraq as well as scores of Shi’a worshippers.⁵

The brutality supported by Zarqawi created an early disagreement between al-Qaeda and Zarqawi’s group. While al-Qaeda advocated a focus on the “far enemy,” meaning the western countries led by the United States, Zarqawi believed that the “apostates” (Sunni Muslims allied with western powers) and the *rafidah* (Shi’a who reject the legitimacy of Mohammed’s immediate successors) would immediately threaten his plans to create an Islamic State in Iraq.⁶ Furthermore, the leaders of both groups were divided over *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Sayf Adl, the al-Qaeda leader and a mentor to Zarqawi, mentioned that “the controversial issues with [Zarqawi] were neither new nor uncommon. The most important issue with [Zarqawi] was the stance regarding the Saudi regime and how to deal with it in light of the Islamic laws that pertain to excommunication and belief.”⁷ Nonetheless, the leadership of both groups continued to negotiate a merger of sorts to capitalize on the galvanizing impact of the U.S. presence in Iraq on Muslims around the region and globe.

The continuation of Zarqawi’s brutal bombing campaign against Shi’a Iraqis was designed to provoke an uncontrolled Shi’a reaction that would eventually drive Sunnis to his group in search of protection.⁸ He also took advantage of environmental factors that fueled Sunni grievances, such as the early De-Baathification programs after the invasion that alienated the overwhelmingly Sunni population of Anbar, where Zarqawi relocated in the summer of 2003.⁹ The Anbar region hosted many insurgent groups with different ideologies and characteristics, such as former regime loyalists, nationalists, tribal and Islamists, and proved to be a fertile recruiting ground for the new group.¹⁰

As the Sunni Triangle – a term used to describe the region north and west of Baghdad including Tikrit, Ramadi, Baqubah, and the capital – developed into a hotbed of insurgency, the religiously conservative city of Fallujah emerged as a nexus for insurgent groups. On March 31, 2004, four Blackwater security contractors were killed in the city; their bodies were mutilated and left hanging on a bridge. The act was broadcasted by different media outlets, influencing an ill-considered U.S. effort to take over the city. However, the operation was deemed a failure as the number of civilian deaths rose to over 800 and resulted in the creation of nearly 60,000 refugees. The operation was called off, and newly created Iraqi security units were installed to maintain order.¹¹

However, the new security units mostly melted away or, in some cases, even assisted the insurgents.¹² As the city became a symbol of successful resistance to the new government rule, the Bush administration once again decided to clear the city of insurgents. In early November, the U.S. military launched an offensive against the militant coalition in Fallujah resulting in fierce urban fighting and many casualties on both sides. 52 U.S. troops, six Iraqi security force members, and nearly 2000 insurgent fighters died in what is considered the bloodiest fight of the Iraq war.¹³ These two battles had a large impact on the growth of Zarqawi’s group, which at this point was called Tawhid wal-Jihad (Monotheism and Struggle)

The first battle of Fallujah brought Zarqawi's group some notoriety due to its success in frustrating the military offensive, causing it to grow rapidly. By the second battle of Fallujah, Zarqawi's negotiations with al-Qaeda were successful and he pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden on October 17th, 2004.¹⁴ Zarqawi leveraged the visibility of his group's participation in the battles for Fallujah to overcome al-Qaeda considerable reticence. In return, the group claimed the brand of al-Qaeda, which set the group apart from Iraqi rivals with no pedigree. The group changed its official name to Tanzim al-Qaeda al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn (the Organization of the Base of Jihad in the land of Mesopotamia, better known as al-Qaeda in Iraq [AQI]), and Zarqawi's group began to accrue the benefits of an extensive network of financing, recruiting, and online media dissemination.¹⁵ The honeymoon period between the al-Qaeda leaders and Zarqawi did not last long, however, as Zarqawi's violent attacks against civilians, Shi'a in particular, began to tarnish the global al-Qaeda brand.¹⁶

In early 2004, before the merger, Zarqawi wrote a letter to his superiors explaining his strategy, naming the Iraqi Shi'a (both the government and the independent religious militias) as "the most evil of mankind," and calling on the *mujahidin* to focus on them over other targets.¹⁷ Zarqawi's soon-to-be superiors in al-Qaeda preferred Zarqawi to focus instead on driving the Americans out, and worry about the Shi'a later. In a 2005 letter addressed to Zarqawi, Bin Laden's then-deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, gently reproached Zarqawi and recommended a shift in his strategy.¹⁸ The fact that neither Zarqawi nor his successors ever changed their strategy was an early indicator of an ideological split between the two movements that would continue to worsen over the next decade.¹⁹

The political backlash resulting from the battles of Fallujah increased Sunni disenchantment of the new government and the occupation.²⁰ People boycotted the first parliamentary and provincial elections of January 2005.²¹ This, coupled with the resultant lack of Sunni participation in the nascent Iraqi government, further exposed the Sunni population to the predation of a wide spread of insurgent groups, especially the newly proclaimed AQI.

The next expansion envisioned by Zarqawi and his lieutenants was a political consolidation of like-minded Salafi groups in Iraq. To facilitate this goal, the Mujahedeen Shura Council (MSC) was established in January 2006 and announced Abdallah Bin Rashid al-Baghdadi, not Zarqawi, as its leader.²² A top Zarqawi deputy, whose real name was Abdulrahman Mustafa al-Qaduli (and better known as Abu Ali al-Anbari), the first "al-Baghdadi," led a new political front that included AQI and several other groups: Jaysh al-Ta'ifa al-Mansura, Saraya 'Ansar al-Tawhid, Saraya al-Jihad al-Islami, Saraya al-Ghuraba, and Kataib al-Ahwal.²³ This merger was seen as a stepping stone to the formation of a future Islamic State, and had the unintended benefit of preparing for the loss of Zarqawi, who was killed by American forces on June 7th, 2006.²⁴ Shortly after Zarqawi's death, the MSC announced that Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (also known as Abu Ayub al-Masri) would replace Zarqawi at the head of AQI. The change was temporary; four months later, Abu Hamza announced the dissolution of AQI and the creation of a new, larger merger of resistance groups and tribes called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Abu Hamza pledged allegiance to a completely different and equally unknown "al-Baghdadi," Abu Omar, the newly appointed "emir of the faithful" of the ISI.²⁵

Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was born Hamid Dawud Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi in 1964 in Anbar province. He was a police officer in Haditha before being dismissed by the Baathists in the late 1980s/early 90s because of his hardline adherence and promulgation of Salafi ideology.²⁶ During Saddam's Faith Campaign, a government-sponsored religious program attempting to stifle the rise of Islamist sentiments following the humiliating defeat by a western-led coalition, open Salafi adherence was a sign of disloyalty to the Ba'ath regime.²⁷ With the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abu Omar started his own militant group in Haditha before pledging allegiance to Zarqawi's early group. The choice of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi to succeed Zarqawi as the new emir was a strategic move to counter the continuous discontent from the Sunni population. Under Abu Omar, the birth of the ISI transformed the movement into a more structured

organization with departments and cabinets, with the hope of increasing legitimacy.²⁸ Abu Omar inherited an increasingly beleaguered organization that was under fire from the Americans, Iraqi security forces, and the “Awakening Forces,” a Sunni tribal force organized to fight the ISI’s domination of Sunni Iraq.²⁹

Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province, was a crucial hub of resistance to the occupation.³⁰ By 2006, the city was the most violent in Iraq and the nascent Islamic State of Iraq designated the “Islamic Emirate of Ramadi” as its “capital.”³¹ Amid this turmoil, Sunni tribal leaders began a small coalition called the *Sahwa* (Awakening). These figures chafed under the growing domination of Zarqawi’s AQI and the soon-to-be Islamic State of Iraq, particularly because of the violence used against the Sunni and the cooption of regular economic trade by the tribes. As a result, the tribal leaders and elements of the large nationalist resistance groups reached a rapprochement with the U.S military to fight together against Zarqawi’s successors. The resultant Sunni civil war saw tremendous losses on both sides, but ISI eventually abandoned Ramadi, causing a subsequent drop in violence in the city.³²

The U.S forces and their Iraqi partners were successful at pushing back against ISI not because they pressed their military advantage, but because they were able to attract an increasingly alienated Sunni population to the side of the government. The Islamic State admitted that the American and Iraqi security forces made potential gains and called for an adjustment of the strategy to keep up with the pace of war.³³

In addition to the military campaigns that the U.S, Iraqi, and tribal forces led against the ISI, the group suffered from structural and bureaucratic hardships that resulted in a drastic decline in fortunes between 2007 and 2009. The organization lost much of its territory, and its fighters were killed, captured, or deserted in large numbers.³⁴ Unable to host foreign fighters in tribal areas with hostile *Sahwa* forces, the group’s leadership began to limit the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq. The local Iraqi population correctly blamed much of the terrorism, especially suicide bombing, on these foreign fighters.³⁵

An ISI after-action review reported several failings, such as a lack of internal communication, poor relations between the emirs and their fighters, and a lack of discipline as contributing to the organization’s decline.³⁶ Brian Fishman argues that “As [ISI] cells proliferated across Iraq, the group’s experienced leadership cadre was diluted and communication became more difficult, to the point where the strategic intent of [ISI’s] high command was not clear to local cells.”³⁷ The bureaucratic failure pushed the ISI deeper into a crisis that endangered its organizational stability.

In response, the ISI took a series of measures to reestablish political power. The leadership under Abu Omar and his Minister Abu Hamza al-Muhajir prioritized consolidation with other like-minded *jihadi* groups, a reconciliation with tribal leaders, tactical military adjustment, and more lenient behavior toward the Sunni groups. As stated in a 2009 strategy document known as the “Fallujah Memo,” “The [Islamic State] should consider unification as one of the most important tactical goals at the current moment and so should the Mujahedeen from other groups.”³⁸ Even Ayman al Zawahiri invited other resistance groups of all types to unify their efforts under the Islamic State banner during this period.

Abu Omar and Abu Hamza also adjusted to the setbacks by offering incentives to tribal leaders to reconsider their new-found allegiance to the Iraqi government.³⁹ On the one hand, they engaged tribal leaders by establishing “The Awakening Jihadi Council” to incorporate tribal leaders and provide them with financial support.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, the ISI leadership ramped up a campaign to kill tribal leaders who continued to sympathize with the government. These assassinations were carefully vetted by the upper echelons of the organization’s leadership.⁴¹

In summary, the ISI spent several years analyzing, and then mitigating, the causes of its decline after 2007. Under the leadership of Abu Omar and his close partner Abu Hamza, the ISI took a series of pragmatic steps to improve their political standing among Sunnis in Iraq. But their struggles were not over. On April 10th, 2010, a joint Iraqi and U.S operation found and killed Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir, setting the stage for a new leader to emerge: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁴²

Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, also known as Abu Bakr al-Husseini al-Hashimi

al-Qurashi, is the former *emir* of ISI and its successor —the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL), and the first caliph of the Islamic State. Abu Bakr was born in 1971 in the city of Samarra (just to the north of Baghdad) to a religious Sunni family with ties to the Salafi movement. He enrolled in Quranic studies at the Saddam University in Baghdad and was taught by several prominent Salafi teachers.⁴³ The American invasion in 2003 was the catalyst for al-Baghdadi to join the resistance to occupation. Captured in Anbar around the time of the Fallujah battles, he was sent to the notorious Camp Bucca prison in 2004, although his stay in the prison was short due to a lack of evidence. After his release from jail at the end of 2004, Abu Bakr secretly joined AQI and later openly joined the MSC. He rose through the ranks and was appointed to many high positions, including membership in the group's *Shura* (advisory) Council.⁴⁴

The death of Abu Omar and his partner Abu Hamza al-Muhajir paved the way for Abu Bakr to become the new *emir*. By May 2010, he was appointed by the *Shura* as the new *emir* and began working to rebuild a struggling organization that had been hit hard in the wake of security breaches that had led to a decimation of organizational leadership. Abu Bakr continued the expansion of a hierarchical structure that still gave autonomy to members to operate as long as they remained within the ISI framework.⁴⁵

Under Abu Bakr, the Islamic State was able to expand its territorial control to include large parts of Syria after he sent several of his fighters into the country to form the Nusra Front in 2011, during the rebellion against Bashar al-Assad. Although some parts of al-Nusra Front and its leader Ahmed Hussein Al Shar'a (Abu Mohammad al-Julani) later broke away from ISI/ISIL to become affiliated with al-Qaeda, al-Baghdadi and his lieutenants were able to establish territorial control in Syria as part of their dream of establishing a future caliphate.

The Islamic State saw the Syrian uprising in 2011 as an opportunity to open a new battlefield and expand. By the end of 2011, Abu Bakr sent movement veteran Abu Mohamed al-Julani to establish the group Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴⁶ Within a few months, al-Nusra was able to absorb a few smaller Syrian resistance groups.⁴⁷ It was able to impose its military dominance on the larger resistance, which encouraged even more groups to join. Tensions between ISI and al-Nusra developed at the end of 2012 as Abu Bakr began to worry about Julani's cooperation with non-*jihadi* groups; he began to assert more influence over his former protégé in Syria. This led to the confrontation and the split – the first and only faction to openly break away from ISI.

Julani's defiance of Abu Bakr's attempt to openly merge the Syrian and Iraqi fronts under one banner led to an intervention by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. The proposed compromise – a return to the *status quo* with each theater reporting directly to al-Qaeda – was rejected by Abu Bakr. Battle-tested in Iraq and ruthless when it came to insurgent rivalry, the now newly-renamed ISIL took the major Syrian city of Raqqa, not from the Assad regime but from other rebel groups, including the Nusra Front.⁴⁸ With Raqqa swollen with internally displaced persons from other parts of Syria, for the first time, the Islamic State had uncontested control over a major population area. *Jihadists*, both Arab and foreign, flocked to the group, among them the famed Chechen *jihadist* Abu Omar al-Shishani and his hardened fighters.⁴⁹

Sectarian tensions in Iraq began to rise again in 2010 for the first time in three years during the Parliamentary election of that year. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki saw Sunni support for his main rival as a threat to his political career, and began to target Sunni members of the political opposition as a result. Subsequent acts alienated a majority of Anbari political leaders, an opening which benefitted the ISI.⁵⁰ In December 2012, the Anbari scene degenerated after Iraqi forces arrested the government finance minister Rafi al-Issawi, a Sunni from al-Fallujah and a member of the influential Abu Issa tribe, and put out warrants for another high-ranking Sunni political leader.⁵¹ In 2013, an ongoing peaceful protest was violently put down by the government, inflaming tensions even further in Anbar.⁵² The Islamic State was stepping up its campaign in Iraq at this point, with the ability to surge its forces on alternating sides of the Syrian border. Researchers noted that “in 2013, 7,818 civilians (including police) were killed in acts of terrorism and violence, more than double the 2012 death toll, according to United Nations figures.

An additional 17,891 were injured, making 2013 Iraq's bloodiest year since 2008.⁵³ Al-Baghdadi and his organization took advantage of this opportunity to increase recruiting from the tribes and form new alliances in Sunni dominated areas.⁵⁴ By this point, the Islamic State had reemerged as a strong challenger to governments in both Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State's activity during this period included a wide array of attacks on government forces using guerrilla attacks and terrorism. One of its most important operations in 2013 was the Abu Ghraib prison raid that liberated over 500 senior Islamic State members.⁵⁵ Many of these prisoners rejoined the ranks of the movement. Among these prisoners was movement veteran Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi, a Zarqawi lieutenant from the early period.

Adnan Ismail Najm al-Bilawi al-Dulaimi was born in 1971 in the Anbar province. A captain in Saddam's Special Forces before joining Zarqawi, Bilawi made it into Zarqawi's inner circle before he was captured in 2005.⁵⁶ Despite his long stay in prison, Bilawi's group connections and his skill as a planner led to his appointment to the General Military Council of ISIL after being freed from Abu Ghraib.⁵⁷ He was posthumously credited with building the plan to squeeze Mosul in 2014, which fell after a long campaign of unrelenting terror and guerilla attacks.⁵⁸ He died early in June 2014 in Mosul, before the fall of the city and the rout of government forces.

As demonstrated with the al-Bilawi example, the Islamic State has been successful at recruiting former military members to play a role in building their guerrilla army. Tarkhan Batirashvili, also known as Umar al-Shishani, was born in 1986 in the Soviet republic of Georgia. Shishani had fought in the 2008 Georgian-Russian war.⁵⁹ He was a sergeant in an elite unit before he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and dismissed from the Georgian army in 2010.⁶⁰ Shishani was jailed for arms possession, serving 16 months, before adopting the Salafi creed and moving to Syria to fight against Assad's regime early in 2013.⁶¹

Shishani formed his fighting groups out of foreign fighters and called them Kateebat al-Muhajireen (the Immigrant Battalion). After pledging allegiance to ISIL in 2013, Shishani was appointed as a commander of ISIL forces in northern Syria. He was also invited to be part of the Delegated Committee (the group's new name for the Shura Council), which made him an advisor to Abu Bakr.⁶² Before the capture of Mosul, Shishani was victorious in several battles against Syrian forces in northern and eastern Syria. Abu Bakr later promoted him to de facto war minister.⁶³ He was eventually killed in July 2016 in a targeted U.S. airstrike.

Abu Ali al-Anbari was born in 1959 under the name Abdul Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli in Tel Afar. He was also known as Abu Ala', Abu Iman, al-Hajji Iman, Abu Hassan, Sayyid Khalil, Abu Zainab, Hajji Taher, Abdullah Rashid al-Baghdadi, Abu Hassan Qardash, Abu Ali al-Anbari, Abu Suhaib al-Iraqi, and Abu Mus'ab al-Shami.⁶⁴ The fact that Anbari had so many names confused Iraqi and American forces; often he was described in the same article as two different persons.⁶⁵ He completed his graduate studies in *sharia* law in 1982 at the University of Baghdad, and was drafted and fought in Iran-Iraq war.⁶⁶ He gave lessons in Tel Afar, where he opposed the Shi'a, the Sufis, and the Baathists.⁶⁷

A biography of Anbari written by his son suggests that Anbari was the mastermind of the unification between AQI and other *jihadi* groups to form the MSC, and he became its leader and spokesman for a short period — in fact Anbari was the first "al-Baghdadi" mentioned above.⁶⁸ In April 2006, Anbari was captured by the Americans and spent a long time in prison, a fact concealed by the MSC and later ISI. Released as part of a post-occupation amnesty in March 2012, Anbari immediately joined his old organization — and made a pledge of allegiance to its *emir*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Abu Ali al-Anbari was appointed vice emir and the *sharia* official of the state.

After the announcement of the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in April 2013, Anbari focused his efforts on the jurisprudence and preaching in the Islamic State and its provinces.⁶⁹ Anbari filled several positions for the *emir* before being appointed as the head of Bayt al-Mal (department of treasury), a position he held in his original group in 2003-4. He was killed by a U.S. special

operations team while traveling to Mosul from Syria in 2016.

The fall of Mosul, inspired by the planning of al-Bilawi, was a milestone for the Islamic State. Outnumbered sixty to one, determined and ruthless ISIL fighters gained an astonishing victory in the city within a week, and captured U.S. supplied weapons and materials stored within.⁷⁰ The northern town of Tal Afar, much of Anbar Province, and several key border crossings all fell to the fighters. Mosul's ancient Christian community was extinguished in one fell swoop as all Christians left *en masse*.⁷¹ ISIL victories displaced as many as 500,000 Iraqi citizens from a variety of religious and ethnic communities. Tikrit and the oil refinery town of Baiji also fell as ISIL forces moved south toward Baghdad, but intervention by Iranian-supported militias prevented the fall of the strategically significant city of Samarra.

Abu Bakr then took the fateful step the Islamic State had repeatedly hinted at since 2006, restoring the Caliphate and declaring himself *Caliph* over all the Muslims. In a unique appearance at Mosul's Nuri Mosque on June 29, 2014, "Caliph Ibrahim" called for Muslims to join the new Caliphate.

GLOBAL REACH

Not long after Abu Bakr's call to unify under one flag, several regional and global *jihadi* organizations were encouraged to join the newly emerging IS. Among these organizations was Ansar Bayt Al Maqdis (ABM), or Supporters of Jerusalem, a *jihadi* terrorist organization that emerged in the northern Sinai Peninsula. Although ABM operates in the Sinai Peninsula bordering Israel, its strategy, similar to that of IS, focuses on attacking the near enemy rather than the far enemy, in this case, the Egypt government and its forces. In November 2014, ABM became one of the first international organizations to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State and changed their name to *Wilayet* (Province) Sinai.⁷² The allegiance brought more than just an ideological, symbolic loyalty; its motivations were also logistical. The devotion to the newly enriched IS, flush with cash from captured Mosul banks and oil resources, provided the new franchise with financial, networking, and recruitment channels.⁷³ The group was able to maintain a semi-independent territorial authority while its *modus operandi* shifted to align itself with Islamic State strategy to focus its attacks on Egyptian security forces rather than on Israel.⁷⁴

By January 2015, IS was able to extend its power east toward another strategic location of the *jihadi* milieu: Afghanistan. In fact, several Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) factions joined together, pledged allegiance, and became known as the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K).⁷⁵ Islamic caliphates historically referred to territories starting from modern-day Iran to Pakistan and Central Asia as Khorasan.⁷⁶ ISIL appointed Hafiz Saeed Khan, a TTP former leader, as the provincial *emir*.⁷⁷ Shortly after, the newly formed province absorbed many other members and *Jihadi* groups such as Lakshar-e-Taiba, Haqqani network, and Afghan Taliban.⁷⁸ However, IS-K was faced by violent opposition from the preexisting groups.⁷⁹ According to Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis, the IS-K challenged preexisting tribal group loyalties and threatened their relationship with the Pakistani state. These actions disturbed the relationship between a global sectarian IS-K and local pragmatic groups.⁸⁰ Reports indicate that IS-K is currently engaged in several confrontations against local groups (predominantly the Taliban).⁸¹ Nonetheless, they have been able to maintain a steady spate of operations against the Afghan government, including terror attacks in the capital.

RECENT ACTIVITY

The Islamic State expansion in Iraq and Syria and the corresponding wave of human rights abuses attracted the attention of the international community.⁸² As resistance to the IS offensive in central Iraq stiffened in August 2014, the Islamic State massacred hundreds of Shi'a cadets and Sunni tribal fighters as a warning against any opposition.⁸³ IS fighters advanced against Kurdish *Peshmerga* (militia) in Ninewa

province outside of Mosul, and conducted a genocide against the Yazidi religious minority in the Sinjar region. These acts and others eventually drew the United States into the conflict, along with a coalition of 80 nations to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State.⁸⁴

The Iraqi-led campaign to liberate Mosul officially started on October 17th, 2016. By July 2017, Mosul was liberated by Iraqi forces, but its historic “right bank” was destroyed, and the cost in the lives of civilian residents numbered in the thousands. By October 17th of the same year, Raqqa, the self-declared capital of the caliphate, was also liberated.⁸⁵ While the coalition’s airstrike heavy campaign was deemed to be effective in killing large quantities of Islamic State fighters, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces were instrumental in ending the physical caliphate in early 2019.⁸⁶

The slow decline of a caliphate that once collected wealth, controlled territory, and had a record number of foreign supporters join it (over 41,000, according to research by Joana Cook and Gina Vale) has incited a series of sharp religious and ideological debates and disputes.⁸⁷ The origins of the problem surfaced between two factions: The “Hazemis” and the “Benalis.”⁸⁸ The Hazemis follow an excommunication concept written by Ahmed Bin Omar al-Hazemi, a Saudi *takfir* scholar. Hazemi is currently arrested in Saudi Arabia.⁸⁹ The main ideological difference between the two groups is that Hazemis believe that ignorance is not an excuse to commit a blasphemous act. The leading members of this faction are North African Tunisians and Moroccans, largely due to Hazemi’s travels and local influence.⁹⁰ Some members of the ultra-orthodox *takfiri* excommunication doctrine even called the Islamic State Caliphate “the State of the blasphemous,” because of a perception that the leaders were soft on those that did not participate in defending the caliphate. On the other hand, the Benalis, who follow the teachings of deceased Bahraini scholar Turki al-Benali, do not believe that ignorance of Islamic duties is a blasphemous act. The “moderate” wing of the Islamic State, including Abu Bakr, were able to crack down on some of the Hazemi leaders and executed several of them.⁹¹ However, many indications show that the Hazemis are still present in the ranks. Right before Benali’s death, he tried to push against this ultra-orthodox excommunication ideology by banning these ideas from official discussion, a motion that ultimately failed. Finally, the continued influence of the Hazemis can be seen in the publication of an article in *al-Naba*, Islamic State’s official Arabic newspaper, titled “Idols or Symbols,” which criticized the glorification of some al-Qaeda affiliated scholars like Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Yahya al-Libi.⁹²

The defeat of the territorial Islamic State is a temporary condition, as we have seen with its predecessor the Islamic State of Iraq. In August 2018, the United Nations estimated that the Islamic State maintains a 41,490 person support network across 80 countries.⁹³ The same month, the office of the U.S. Department of Defense Lead Inspector General released a report approximating the group to have roughly 30,000 active fighters.⁹⁴ Both of these assessments stand in contrast to President Trump’s multiple announcements that the Islamic State has been defeated.⁹⁵ The continued insurgency in Iraq and Syria, as well as its ties to affiliates around the globe, show that the group has transformed into a lower level of insurgency that does not control much territory (in fact, it controls no territory in Iraq and Syria). Abu Bakr’s goal was to bide time until another opportunity arises, much like what happened after 2010.⁹⁶ Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, the Islamic State official spokesman, released an audio speech promising to spread the war to different places, stating:

O lions of the Khilafah and men of the State in Raqqah, Barakah, and Khayr leap like hungry lions, avenge the blood of your brothers and sisters, and declare a raid of revenge that will extirpate the roots of the people of kufr and atheism from Sham. Make these like the days of Zarqawi that will eliminate the ranks of the Crusaders and apostates. Seal the explosive devices, spread the snipers, and launch explosive attacks using boobytraps.⁹⁷

Western intelligence officials are concerned that their citizens who traveled to the caliphate will return and possibly conduct terrorist attacks in home countries.⁹⁸ What happens to the thousands of foreigners,

and to the tens of thousands of locals in regional prisons, is an important question for the future of regional and European stability.

As of November 2019, the group has announced new leadership following the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a U.S. special operation raid near Idlib, Syria, where the *caliph* was hiding. ISIS spokesman Abu Hassan al-Muhajir was also killed in late October in northern Syria. The group confirmed these deaths and announced Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi as the emir of the believers and caliph, and Abu Hamza al-Quraishi was named the new spokesman. The identity of neither man is known, but the announcement noted that both men have experience against the Americans as part of AQI/ISI.⁹⁹

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