

Neo al Qaeda: The Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS)

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- How has ISIS, coming to the fore in Iraq and Syria, emerged?
 - How has the basic philosophy of the organization been shaped and who are the leaders of this organization?
 - How did ISIS sprout off al Qaeda?
 - Is it an ephemeral phenomenon or a permanent figure in the region?
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The presence of ISIS has captivated the whole world. Recently, ISIS has become the center of attention with its latest activities and confrontation with the anti-Assad forces in Syria. The organization is now being scrutinized for the scenes of violence reminiscencing of the Iraq war, the crack up of the military units under Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, and the fall of Sunni cities in a jiff. While ISIS has put the international community in a state of confusion about its purpose and identity, the activities in Iraq and Syria have generated questions about its leadership and power, and its competition with al Qaeda has caused questions regarding its philosophy. This *Perspective* is dedicated to answering these questions in order to better understand the next round of moves by ISIS.

BRIEF HISTORY: THE EARLY PERIOD STARTING WITH ABU MUS'AB AL ZARQAWI

The history of the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (*Ad-dawla l'islāmiyya fil-'irāq waš-šām*), abbreviated as ISIL or ISIS, is based on an understanding of “jihad” in the Islamic World, which appeared as a direct

reaction to the occupation of the Soviet power. Theorized by Abdullah al Azzam, the understanding of jihad has been scaled up to a level of global organization by Osama bin Laden and channeled into ISIS after the US occupation of Iraq. The Sunni insurgency that has emerged following the Coalition forces and US-led occupation in 2003 entailed the incorporation of al Qaeda elements under al Zarqawi into the resistance, and paved the way for the beginning of a process that has brought ISIS into existence.

In conjunction with the US invasion of Afghanistan, al Zarqawi left this country. After settling in the north of Iraq by way of Iran, he acted in concert for a while with Ansar al Islam ([Partisans of Islam]) which was active in the region during those days. The Saddam Hussein administration crumbled with the US intervention in Iraq and a serious security gap occurred as a result. The repeal of the Iraqi army by the US and the consequential plunder of arsenals played a role in this. After the US completely took control of Iraq, a period of low-intensity conflict began and it did not take long for the entire country to be dragged into a total chaos. The attacks against the US

forces suddenly spread out and severe insurgency took off in the Sunni regions in particular.

One of the most successful elements of this insurgency in the field has been the group called Tawhid and Jihad (*Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, or JTJ in short*) led by al Zarqawi. His background in Afghanistan had helped al Zarqawi to have connections with the international jihad network; therefore, he managed easily the penetration of foreign belligerents in Iraq. The structure formed by bin Laden while al Zarqawi was in Afghanistan established contact with him and they began to act together. A group of fighters in this group had fought before in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia and Kashmir, and came to Iraq to wage a war against the US forces. So, they were naturally experienced. Yet others pouring from different parts of the Arab and Islamic world to have their first "jihad experience" were young and inexperienced. In a short period of time, however, hundreds of fighters have entered Iraq and joined this group.

In 2004, al Zarqawi announcing his true obedience to al Qaeda center, changed the name of the group to Al Qaeda of Iraq and Mesopotamia, or Al Qaeda Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers (*Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*), or AQI in short. The organization reached its peak during that period and launched massive attacks against the US and the Coalition forces. To the contrary of other Sunni insurgency groups in the field, AQI -- holding professional war tactics and disciplined structures -- rapidly morphed into the largest armed group in the country. AQI succeeded by clearing out the US and Iraqi security forces of some critical Sunni regions starting with in the al Anbar Province.

AQI, in the meantime, had started to find ways to spread among Iraqis in response to criticisms that the group was more foreign than Iraqi; therefore, in early 2006 an umbrella organization, the Mujahideen Shura Council, was formed. The formation of the Council was undertaken to help unify Iraqi insurgent efforts. In the same period, AQI turned a dominant figure in the Azamiyah, Kazimiyah and Abu Ghraib neighborhoods of capital Baghdad. However, the death of al Zarqawi

during a US airborne attack in June 2006 came to be a critical turning point for the organization.

THE PERIOD OF ABU HAMZA AL MUHAJIR AND THE IRAQ ISLAM STATE

After Zarqawi was killed, Abu Hamza al Muhajir succeeded him. Shiite elements gradually becoming more influential in Iraq turned into a prime target for the organization since they were involved in the operations held with the US forces against Sunnis. After joining forces under the Mujahideen Shura Council with the Soldiers of the Prophet's Companions (*Jund al-Sahaba*), the Army of Conquerors (*Jaish al-Fatiheen*) and the Army of the Victorious Sect (*Jaish al-Taif al-Mansura*) led by Abu Omar al Ansari, Muhajir declared the Islamic State of Iraq¹ (ISI) in late 2006, accepted Abu Omar al Baghdadi as the leader, and himself became the Minister of War.

As the attacks against the US occupation forces and sectarian fights escalated, the US adopted a new strategy of war by appointing Army General David Petraeus as the Commander in Chief of Central Command (CENTCOM). In the framework of the new Bush Doctrine², US deployed more troops in Iraq and in an attempt to break down the insurgency formed the "Councils for the Awakening of Iraq" by convincing tribes in Sunni regions in particular and some of the insurgency groups. This new strategy had been effective and almost all other groups, with the exception of ISI and Ansar al Islam, laid down arms and joined the Awakening Councils after being put on a payroll, and started to fight together with the US forces against these (two) groups. The US' new policy hit a blow on the insurgency in Iraq and ISI almost completely lost its power during the period of 2007-2009. ISI's demand of absolute obedience and tougher attitude towards locals also played a role in this power loss.

1. Ufuk Ulutaş, Halid Hoca, "Suriye, Devrim mi Bölünme mi?", *SETA Analiz*, no. 95 (May 2014).

2. TC Foreign Ministry, "ABD'nin Yeni Irak Stratejisi Konusunda Başkan Bush'un Konuşması hk" *Bakanlık Açıklaması*, no.5 (January 11, 2007).

THE IRAQIZATION AND THE BAATH ALLIANCE

As ISI was losing a great deal of fighters and operational capability in no small measure, it set the pace for reconstruction afterwards. To this end, ISI declared an amnesty for the former Baathists, who were not allowed to join the Iraqi army at the time and announced that the former Baathists would be allowed into the movement if they show repentance. Thus, as some of the Baathists joined ISI, the decreasing number of fighters from outside in the same period forced ISI to include Iraqi belligerents in the group and assign them to high level posts.

In the meantime, General Haji Bakr, a former Baath Army officer, participated in this entity and moved up with his military experience. ISI launched the re-organization process under Bakr's influence, developed new tactics, and explored new connections and financial sources while ISI belligerents committed assassinations and organized massive attacks against the Awakening Councils. Bakr made to the ISI Shura. Soon after, al Baghdadi and al Muhajir were captured dead during a meeting in a 24-hour exchange of fires with the security forces in 2010. Within a few weeks, some of the ISI Shura members were run down by the Iraqi Security Forces and the US troops. Meanwhile, Bakr and former Baathists who were brought in by him reached a certain level of majority in the Shura.

THE PERIOD OF ABU BAKR AL BAGHDADI AND THE PROCESS OF SEPARATION FROM AL QAEDA

Haji Bakr presented Abu Bakr al Baghdadi for obedience to the Majlis Shura Al Mujahideen although he was not in any significant position previously. With the support of his group, Bakr requested al Baghdadi's admission to the Majlis Shura saying that he would be approved by al Qaeda center. The Qaeda center, on the other hand, asked a report on al Baghdadi about his past, if the consultation had been observed, and if he was a reliable man and experienced. ISI revealed in return that al Baghdadi was selected by the Majlis Shura, he was a reliable and experienced man of merit, and

that the Center was free to remove him. Yet Al Qaeda Center approved his leadership with the understanding of not interfering much in similar decisions of local bodies. Besides, al Baghdadi continued to be part of Al Qaeda by renewing his obedience to Ayman al Zawahiri who was newly selected in replacement of bin Laden after he was killed by the US forces in 2011.

Two important developments affecting ISI took place in that period. A new process emerged in Syria along with the Arab Spring and a new civil war loomed out of the crisis in the country. Simultaneously, as the US forces left Iraq; ISI began to pull itself up, organized bomb attacks and committed assassinations targeting security forces and members of the Awakening Councils in Sunni regions. Foreign fighters of ISI, Syrians in particular, were prompted by al Baghdadi to penetrate Syria, and this forced ISI to form a group in Syria. ISI had contacted Al Qaeda Center for this and been given permission to form a branch in Syria on condition of keeping Al Qaeda nom de guerres and connections in secret. The Nusra Front (*Jabhat an-Nurah li-Ahl ash-Shām*) was, therefore, established under the leadership of Fatih Abu Mohammad al Jaulani.

Al Jaulani rapidly formed a very strong group in Syria and held operations against the Bashar al Assad regime. To the contrary of other groups in the country, this group consisting of veteran belligerents was quite organized; naturally it turned out to be one of the strongest opponent groups fighting against the Syrian regime. However, ISI was disturbed by the flock of foreign fighters to Syria, voluminous financial support, weapons and munitions confiscated from the Assad regime as well as countrywide and worldwide fame of the Nusra Front. Consequently, ISI asked of al Jaulani to abolish the Nusra Front and announce his commitment to ISI. When al Jaulani refused to do so, Haji Bakr and some Iraqi leaders of the organization entered Syria to take over the Nusra Front and tried to rejuvenate obedience to al Baghdadi. After a while, al Baghdadi arriving in Syria declared the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS).

Al Qaeda's executive team and al Zawahiri announced that ISIS would remain in Iraq and the Nusra Front in Syria; al Baghdadi and al Jawlani would remain as the leaders of their groups, but a year later the Center would make a new evaluation and a further decision via the Majlis Shura regarding their situations. Al Qaeda Center also announced that both affiliates should support each other and appointed Abu Musab al Suri, a founder of Ahrar al Sham, as the arbitrator for disagreements between the two, if any. The Nusra Front accepted the decision, yet ISIS rejected it saying that they would remain in Syria. Neither the executive of al Qaeda nor other names and groups in Syria were able to convince ISIS otherwise. After that, ISIS took over all the military and financial sources of the Nusra Front and asked (contrary to the Nusra Front) commitments of other groups. The Muhajireen and al Ansar groups (*Jaish al Muhajireen wal Ansar*), which were joined by the foreign fighters not admitted in by the Nusra Front in particular and young belligerents who were coming to the jihadist regions for the first time in those days joined the ISIS.

The leader of this group Omar al Shishani, an ethnic Chechen from the Pankisi Gorge of Georgia, announced support to ISIS, though he was not fully committed, but later on made a full commitment to ISIS. Again in that period, a segment of foreign fighters in the Nusra Front left this group and joined ISIS. Many other foreign belligerents (al muhajireen) who did not wish to take any side formed their own groups. For a while, talks continued to find a solution, but ISIS rejected all of the solution offers.

The tension between ISIS and other groups escalated following a series of incidents when ISIS refused the trial of its men in a Sharia court announcing that they would be judged only in an ISIS court. Furthermore, ISIS did not recognize the joint Sharia courts and formed its own Sharia courts. ISIS stressed that it was a "state" but others were either an organization or a group, so they were not in the same status. The situation caused a great deal of tension in time and all opposition groups protes-

ted ISIS following the arrests, tortures and murders of some al Ahrar leaders and members.

In the same period, Haji Bakr, known as the mastermind of ISIS, was killed by Al Tawhid Brigade (*Liwa al Tawhid*), an affiliate of the Islamic Front located up north in Syria; and Al Baghdadi managed to escape. Locals and other groups in many places where the Syrian opponents were effective walked against ISIS and repelled it from numerous regions. ISIS, on the otherhand, concentrated in the northern provinces of Raqqa and al Bab, pushed out opposition groups, threatened the opponents near Hasaka, [northeast of the country], with either joining ISIS or death, and claimed control of the area. Recently, ISIS changed direction towards Deir ez Zor and tried to take over the regions controlled by the opposition groups. The Syrian regime launches no massive attack against ISIS fighting against the opponents (of the regime). Similarly, ISIS targets the opponents rather than the Syrian regime. The reason behind this is that ISIS wishes to dominate the border region stretching into Iraq where the Syrian opposition is more active. ISIS has largely withdrawn from other areas which do not to bring any particular benefits for Iraq.

Issued by al Qaeda leader al Zawahiri in early May 2014, the message titled "Testimonial to Preserve the Blood of Mujahideen in al Sham" neither ended the friction inside the Qaeda network nor stopped the clashes in Syria. Via its official spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani, ISIS responded in a message, titled "Apology to al Qaeda Sheikh". Adnani using a harsh and bitter language towards al Zawahiri overtly targetted the Nusra Front.³ The military, psychological and media battle between the two sides has continued, escalating gradually.

ISIS' INCREASING EFFECTIVENESS IN IRAQ

After the US pulled out of Iraq in 2011, Prime Minister al Maliki began to form an authoritarian rulership with the support of Iran, albeit facing a great deal of

3. Mohammad Abu Rumman, "El Kaide ile IŞİD arasındaki anlaşmazlığın boyutları", *Al Jazeera Türkçe*, June 2, 2014

reactions by Kurds and Sunnis in particular. As Maliki adopted more ethnic and sectarian policies, increased pressure over Sunni politicians and domiciled more Shiite entities in big cities - particularly Baghdad - by manipulating demographics, the reactions have soared to a level of threat against Iraq's territorial integrity. In a period where the ethnic-sectarian conflicts and interventions by the powerful occurred, Maliki's the State of Law Coalition won the general elections on April 30, 2014. The election results fueled already-heated debates in the country.

ISIS have been fighting against the coalition forces since the US occupation of Iraq, and now is struggling against Maliki and the Shiite militia. Recently, however, ISIS has turned more active in the field owing to the support of Sunni Arab tribes who are fed up with Maliki's pressure and sectarian policies. The civil war in Syria as well has increased the influence of ISIS in Iraq. ISIS has gained additional sympathizers after the support program backing up Sunni tribes during Petreaus' period has ended and negative policies have been adopted towards the same tribes.

However, ISIS has organizes large-scale attacks by virtue of coming into play on the Syrian-Iraqi border and transferring to Iraq the financial sources, munitions and men it has gained. This, in time, has caused a breakdown in the Iraqi Army and triggered an uprising in the Sunni region. The latest operation in Mosul, the fall of Tikrit and other key Sunni cities are the results of this long-term strategy and a speedy progress for ISIS and some other Sunni groups.

THE ISIS LEADERSHIP

Currently, al Baghdadi is the leader of ISIS. The organization has a strong Shura Council, of which is completely composed of Iraqis only. One of the key figures in the Council Haji Bakr was killed in Syria in January, and the other key player Abu Abdurrahman al Balawi al Anbari was killed in a skirmish while he was commanding the Mosul operation. One of the most important media figures of ISIS is Abu Mohammad al Adnani al Shami, as the name refers; a native of Syria –from Idlib. Most

of the statements are prepared by him and he is good in rhetoric. Abu Ayman al Iraqi is a former Baathist who led an ISIS affiliate in Lattakia for a while. He is accused of organizing attacks against the Syrian opponents. Abu Ali al Anbari is a former Baathist as well and one of the key men in the Majlis Shura.

Omar al Shishani is in charge of the highest level of command in ISIS-Syria. He commands large-scale operations and currently is leading an operation targeting Deir al- Zor. The oldest Nusra leader in this city, Amir Rafdan joined ISIS and the claim is that while leaving he took with him millions of dollars confiscated by the Nusra Front. He attempted to give Konoko oil wells to ISIS and this has caused the conflict between the Nusra Front and ISIS. Again, another media figure of ISIS is "Abu Waheb" who executed Syrian Alawi truck drivers last summer and was involved in a series of operations around al Anbar province. Waheb was promoted and given the leadership of the regions in the south of Baghdad by ISIS. Abu Omar al Kuwaiti is the person whose voice records were revealed in the media and who claimed that Taliban is an unbeliever. Al Kuwaiti is the judge of ISIS. Abu'l Asir is Syrian and in charge of the Aleppo region. Abu Uwaid was the Governor of Hom appointed by ISIS who was killed by the Syrian opposition recently. Abu Osama al Maghribi from Africa was one of the ISIS military commanders who was also killed in a clash between the opponent groups.

ISIS' POWER AND INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE NETWORK

Presently, a considerable number of thousands of ISIS fighters in Syria are foreigners. ISIS has a more native profile and stronger communication with people and tribes in Iraq. On the other hand, popular support for ISIS in Syria is almost next to nothing. Top level men in ISIS mostly consist of former Baathists and there are almost no foreigners among the administrators. Although the foreign fighters of ISIS are assigned to military commandship in the field or are appointed as judges, the decision body is the Majlis Shura, members of which are all Iraqis.

Today, ISIS is trying to attract the global support in the same way al Qaeda was able to gain. ISIS has made a few attempts to have the commitments of other al Qaeda branches so that it can mix these groups with its own. So far, none of these groups has announced commitment to ISIS except a noname group in Lebanon and another one in Palestine. Key Palestinian figures of the Salafis in Jordan, such as Abu Mohammad Maqdisi and Abu Katade, have supported the Nusra Front; Hasan al Kattani in Magrib has announced his support for the Nusra Front against ISIS.⁴

Nonetheless, ISIS follows a policy to have the commitments of these groups by breaking them apart through the sympathizers among them. The Supporters of Holy House (*Ansar Bait al Maqdis*) in Egypt and the Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem in Gaza sympathize with ISIS to some degree. In addition, Partisans of Sharia (*Ansar al Sharia*) in Tunisia is known to have utmost sympathy for ISIS; still, the group has not declared commitment to ISIS. On the other hand, Ansar al Sharia in Libya is still loyal to the Qaeda Center. Again, ISIS has certain sympathy in Indonesia and other Far Eastern countries. The organization has also managed to create an impact among Muslims living in Europe. It has rolled up the sleeves to vitiate the influence of al Qaeda Center and become the leader of the global jihad.

The killings of charismatic and influential al Qaeda leaders have played a role in the increasing effectiveness of ISIS. The absence of a man measuring up to Osama bin Laden has created a big gap in the organization. The Al Qaeda center of power has weakened, yet its branches in various countries have gained

strength. Differences in tendencies between the center of power and branches have caused differences in attitudes and approaches of sub-groups. Besides, the core of power in al Qaeda is the prime target of the US and it may be said that this is also an important factor making the organization less effective.⁵

On a local scale, ISIS attempts to become more dominant through sectarian discourses, adamant and brutal tactics, and military power on the Sunni line in Iraq and Syria, as it wishes to garner the support of the jihadi movement on the global scale. Although the objectives ISIS has set fly high; the seemingly effective chain of command, tactical steps taken and the survival capability show that ISIS has been gradually increasing its sphere of influence owing to the organizational mindset of al Qaeda and the adoption of cruel and oppressive management and military methods of the former Baath.

Al Qaeda was designated as the biggest loser in the overthrows of dictators through non-violent popular uprisings during the early periods of the Arab Spring. However, the counter-revolution afterwards, the narrowed sphere of political Islam and denying a space of living to political Islam have caused the emergence of the jihadist understandings. Now, ISIS is on the rise as a result of these policies as well as the counter-fact of the sectarian policies adopted by Maliki with the Iranian support. It has been observed that ISIS expects absolute commitment from other groups and gets into fight with them otherwise. Thus, it may be said that the effectiveness and permanence of ISIS will be determined by its relations with Sunni-Arab allies in Iraq.

4. Mohammad Abu Rumman, "El Kaide ile IŞİD".

5. Mohammad Abu Rumman, "El Kaide ile IŞİD"

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