

ISIS: The Evolution of a Terrorist State

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Abstract

ISIS has proved to be a persistent threat in recent history by adapting to whatever political situation it finds itself in. While ISIS is often considered a modern terrorist group, its history stretches far back to the Invasion of Iraq and even Arab-Israeli tensions. ISIS took on new roles such as state building and law enforcement, but ultimately was unable to keep up militarily with its state adversaries. While the Caliphate has been destroyed, ISIS will continue to pose a threat if their policy of evolution continues to succeed.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was at one point the most dangerous terrorist organization operating in the Middle East. ISIS evolved from a small band of radical jihadists detained in a Jordanian prison to a terrorist state with territory stretching across several countries. Under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the IS predecessor, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) played a prominent role in the chaos of the US occupation by upending law and order and stoking sectarian conflict that continues to be a problem today. US forces and tribal groups partnered together in the Anbar Awakening to decimate AQI, but AQI took this opportunity to morph into the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). ISI then evolved into a terrorist army as a result of civil unrest in Syria and rebranded itself as ISIS and then simply IS. The secret to IS success has been blitzkrieg-like tactics, extreme brutality, and capitalizing on social and political cleavages to move between different levels of warfare. While these factors helped IS rise, they also played an important role in the destruction of The Islamic State's caliphate.

ISIS was born in a remote Jordanian prison. Known as Al-Jafr, this high-security prison was set up to contain some of Jordan's most dangerous criminals including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi, the original progenitors of what would become ISIS. Zarqawi, born Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh, of Zarqa was not born a jihadist. His life of crime and subsequent adoption of radical Islamism mirrors that of many future recruits that would come to join him and his terrorist descendants decades later. In his early years, Zarqawi was little more than a petty criminal and street thug (Warrick, 2016, p.49). He is reported to have used drugs and alcohol, and had tattoos, all things strictly prohibited by the Muslim faith. His mother was devoutly religious and pushed him to attend religious classes at the Hussayn ben Ali mosque. After committing to a pious Islamic life, Zarqawi was taken by stories of Islamic warriors around the world and left Jordan to fight in Afghanistan 1989 (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 16). While he did not participate in any fighting because the Soviets pulled out soon after his arrival, he did gain practical experience and contacts. He was also rigorously indoctrinated in the ideology of jihad and salafism. After failing to adjust to normal Jordanian life upon his return, Zarqawi formed his first terrorist group known as Bay'at al-Imam with radical cleric Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi in 1994 (Warrick, 2016, p.55). The group planned to attack an Israeli border post in order to disrupt the Israeli-Jordanian peace process, but was never able to accomplish its mission. Later that year, Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate agents raided the group's hideout and arrested both Zarqawi and Maqdisi. They were both incarcerated in Al-Jafr, but would not remain there long. While in prison, Zarqawi overtook Maqdisi as leader of the group, pushing his brutal agenda to the forefront. When Jordanian King Abdullah II succeeded his father, King Hussein, he proclaimed a general amnesty and Zarqawi was released from prison.

Zarqawi traveled to Pakistan where he slipped across the border into Afghanistan to meet with Osama Bin Laden in 2000. While Al-Qaeda leadership found Zarqawi to be gruff and atypical for an Al-Qaeda recruit, they gave him his own franchise in Herat, western Afghanistan. With money and a camp provided by Al-Qaeda, Zarqawi quickly set up Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJ). The purpose of the JTJ camp was to train foreign fighters who came from Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and beyond. JTJ used connections to the nearby Iranian border to bring these recruits into Afghanistan. Zarqawi was not privy to bin Laden's plans for the September 11th attacks, and may have even been out of the country when they took place, but he was targeted by the United States and Northern Alliance forces during the invasion of Afghanistan. Zarqawi's camp was destroyed in an airstrike while Osama bin Laden fled to the Tora Bora mountains (Warrick, 2016, p.68).

After being injured in Afghanistan, Zarqawi fled with the remnants of JTJ to Iran, where he most likely received medical treatment before moving on to Iraq. Remote northern Iraq gave Zarqawi the perfect haven to rebuild his training camp and prepare to retaliate against the West. Zarqawi's presence in Iraq became the focal point of Colin Powell's 2003 address to the UN security council in which he attempted to make the case that Zarqawi was the link between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein (Warrick, 2016, p.94). Many of these assertions came from unreliable reports and misconstrued intelligence. The CIA repeatedly asked for authority to strike his new training camp and destroy Ansar al-Islam, but was denied, and the Bush administration opted to invade Iraq entirely in 2003 (Warrick, 2016, p.75). This strategy only bolstered radical terrorist groups and destabilized the region leading to what is now known as the Islamic State. US forces quickly dispatched the Iraqi army and soon thereafter captured Saddam Hussein. The United States then pushed Sadaam's Baath party, a predominantly Sunni organization, aside in a policy known as de-baathification. The US authorities also dissolved the Iraqi army and other security forces. This left thousands of well-trained Sunni security and political officials out of power in a majority Shia country and set the stage for a brutal insurgency and an alliance between Zarqawi and disenfranchised Baathists. After the invasion, Iraq was awash with weapons and people willing to use them for two main purposes. The first was to drive out American forces, a goal shared by both Sunni and Shia militants. The second was to engage in sectarian reprisals. Zarqawi displayed an acute knowledge of Iraq's sectarian divides and how to use them to his advantage. He attacked several targets that contributed to triggering a sectarian civil war that the Coalition Provisional Authority was ill equipped to control. Zarqawi earned the nickname "The Sheikh of Slaughters."

Zarqawi's first attack in Iraq was a truck bombing at the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad in 2003. The blast killed eleven people and shook the surrounding neighborhood. It also shook the confidence of Iraqis by proving that the occupation and scant Iraqi security forces were unable to protect them. Zarqawi's second target was the UN headquarters in a Baghdad hotel. A truck with former Iraqi Air Force weapons inside drove straight into the hotel and detonated, killing the UN chief of mission (Warrick, 2016, pp.106-110). This attack crippled the UN's peacebuilding efforts in the area, forced NGOs to evacuate, and further demonstrated the terrorists' ability to strike anywhere they pleased. Zarqawi's brazenness would reach a new high in his third attack in 2003.

On August 29th, 2003, Ayatollah Mohammed Bakir al-Hakim gave a rousing sermon at the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, his hometown. Al-Hakim was a member of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SICRI), a prominent Shiite opposition party who lived in exile in Iran before the invasion. Al-Hakim called for unity in a divided Iraq and for the withdrawal of American forces. Al-Hakim was killed in a truck bombing outside the mosque that closely resembled the one used to destroy the UN HQ. The assassination engendered a high degree of mistrust between Shia and Sunni sects, making reconciliation and cooperation nearly impossible (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 28). More importantly, it enraged SICRI's armed wing, the Badr Corps, an Iran backed militia. The Badr corps retaliated against both the Sunni population and American forces with brutal efficiency. Iraq's Shia population and its militias were baited into a horrible overreaction that started a sectarian civil war and created the right conditions for greater regional instability, terrorism, and sectarian warfare.

In 2004, Zarqawi formally pledged *bayat*, or allegiance, to Osama bin Laden, and JTJ became Al-Qaeda in Iraq (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 19). AQI's ranks swelled with foreign fighters and former Baathists looking for revenge. AQI only comprised 14% of fighters in Iraq,

but was by far one of the most intense terrorist groups in Iraq, carrying out over 42% of suicide bombings (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 28). In 2005, AQI massacred Shias and Americans, causing reprisals that ultimately kept Sunnis from going to the polls, with as little as 1% voting in some provinces (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 42). This further isolated them from the government and made them more resentful. In 2006, AQI bombed the Samarra mosque and kicked off a period of brutal Shia reprisals led by the Iraqi government and Popular Mobilization Forces (Warrick, 2016, p. 203). AQI forces soon took control of territory outside of Ramadi and Fallujah. AQI also co-opted state institutions like customs agencies to do its bidding, such as preventing supplies for the Coalition from crossing in from Jordan (Warrick, 2016, p.208). While not on the same level as ISIS, this period was a bloody harbinger of what the next decade would bring.

Later in 2006, AQI began to wear out its welcome with the Sunni tribes. Long periods of bloodshed and suffocating AQI rule turned the tribes back towards the central government and US forces. Tribal leaders grew tired of AQI's imposition of strict Islamic codes and their own loss of control. Nighttime vigilantes began hunting AQI members, seeking revenge for their family members who had been raped or murdered (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 69). US forces seized the opportunity to build trust with the tribes who ultimately partnered with the government out of self-interest. Tribal leaders formed emergency councils and hundreds of Sunni tribesmen joined the Iraqi police. This movement came to be known as the Anbar Awakening (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 220). Alongside the Awakening, the Bush administration deployed 30,000 new troops to Iraq who were tasked with hunting AQI, territorial control, and keeping Shia and Sunni forces apart long enough for political concessions to be made. US forces were also deployed into Iraq's troubled cities that had become havens for extremists. In Baghdad, US forces erected large walls to keep different religious and political groups apart and minimize their chances of direct conflict.

A major breakthrough happened in June 2006. US surveillance aircraft tracked Zarqawi's religious advisor to the town of Hibhib where they spotted Zarqawi. Zarqawi's hideout was struck by two bombs dropped from an F-16. US Delta Force troops arrived twenty minutes later to confirm that Zarqawi had been killed (Warrick, 2016, pp. 216-217). Without him, AQI declined rapidly as US and Iraqi forces retook control of the country with the help of local militias.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq underestimated the resolve and religious fervor of Iraq's Sunni tribes. The tribe's main gripe was political rather than religious. Tribal leaders and former Baathists accepted AQI as a means to restore their power rather than establish an Islamic state. Sunnis had the same enemy as AQI, naturally making them effective partners, but AQI failed to see the nuance of this newfound relationship. AQI's extreme interpretation of Islam and predatory nature eventually wore out its credibility so much that the tribes chose cooperation with the government and US over AQI. American forces recognized this and ensured that Sunni tribes played a central role in defeating AQI and securing Iraq. Unfortunately, the Shia dominated government continued to abuse the tribes after the Anbar Awakening, thus ensuring that when ISIS came to power the tribes would not partner with the Iraqi government to fight them.

New leaders, al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi renamed AQI as the Islamic State in Iraq and took the group underground. In 2010, a US raid killed them both (Warrick, 2016, p.250). After their deaths, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was proclaimed as the new emir of ISI. Baghdadi was nothing like his predecessor, Zarqawi. Baghdadi received both a masters and doctorate in Islamic studies from the University of Islamic Science, in stark contrast to the high school dropout Zarqawi (Warrick, 2016, p.117). Those who met Baghdadi before he became

caliph have described him as shy and demure. After his university mentor returned from fighting in Afghanistan, he became more radical and adopted Salafism. After the US invasion, Baghdadi formed an Islamist organization, but was detained by US forces in Camp Bucca before he could do anything. Camp Bucca did far more to foster his jihadism than deter it.

Camp Bucca and other detention centers were havens that allowed radical ideology to fester. Thousands of Iraqi men suspected of extremism were detained in Camp Bucca. At the height of Camp Bucca operations, there were 24,000 prisoners detained at once for a grand total of 100,000 total detainees in its lifetime (McCoy, 2014). People who were already violent extremists met others with their same violent depredations and forged new networks for when they were released. Bomb makers, soldiers, and terrorist leaders were all detained within the same facility, and those not already indoctrinated were at the mercy of the zealots in the bed next door. Camp Bucca was such an effective tool for jihadists that they deliberately tried to be sent there (Warrick, 2016, p. 82). Former IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was detained there for several years. He was reportedly viewed as a peacemaker and allowed to roam the prison nearly at will. This allowed him to forge new contacts in ISI that would eventually propel him to the position of caliph (Warrick, 2016, p. 258-259). Camp Bucca and other facilities like Abu Ghraib would not only radicalize the detainees but also Muslim populations around the world. US military prisons engendered a greater sense of moral outrage for years to come. ISIS and its predecessors would make a point of attacking prisons, freeing detained comrades, and executing detained Shias in the future. ISI propaganda would continuously emphasize the prison experience with those being executed wearing similar orange jumpsuits to those worn in US military prisons. In 2004, an American named Nick Berg, wearing an orange jumpsuit, was brutally beheaded, likely by Zarqawi himself, on camera (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 30). ISIS would repeat this ritual with similar jumpsuits and a black clad executioner with a British accent known as “Jihadi John.” US prisons did far more to promote jihadism than stop it and proved to be a major propaganda victory for extremists.

In May 2011, reform protests began in Syria. At first, protests were largely peaceful, but President Assad sought to discredit them. Assad released a number of dangerous al-Qaeda terrorists from jail to make it seem as though this was a terrorist uprising rather than a popular groundswell (Warrick, 2016, p.243). In December of the same year, the last of US forces evacuated Iraq. The instability of the greater Middle East, Syria, and the absence of US forces in Iraq created the perfect opportunity for the severely weakened ISI to return to power. Baghdadi dispatched a small detachment, as few as eight men, to make contact with other extremist forces in Syria and gain new recruits (Warrick, 2016, p. 251). The extremists released by Assad became key new members of Baghdadi’s expeditionary force. By 2012, this group came to be known as Jabhat al-Nusra, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda (Warrick, 2016, p. 267). Al-Nusra began by fighting the regime and taking control over areas where government forces fled (Warrick, 2016, p. 275). Al-Nusra was composed of experienced fighters and enjoyed both military success and support from anti-Assad civilians. In April 2013, Baghdadi announced that ISI would envelop Al-Nusra to form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. This immediately provoked a negative reaction from Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who rebuked Baghdadi for announcing a merger without prior approval. Several months later, after denying an order to submit to Zawahiri, ISIS was officially kicked out of Al-Qaeda (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 196). Thousands of fighters from Al-Nusra and other jihadist organizations streamed into ISIS ranks. Rather than crippling or delegitimizing it, this strengthened it, representing a new generation of jihadism that was much more grotesque than its predecessors.

One of ISIS's first operations was to free prisoners from facilities across Iraq, giving it a new force of experienced troops. ISIS quickly moved to fill the void left by Syrian government troops and seized a number of cities in the short span of a few months. By the end of 2013, ISIS forces were taking control of Ramadi, their former capital, and Fallujah. ISIS also took control of the border highway in Iraq that would allow them access to Syria. In April of 2013, ISIS took control of Raqqa, Syria, where it would declare its capital (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 182). In June, ISIS forces converged on Mosul with little more than light weapons and pickup trucks. Within three days, ISIS took full control of the city after Iraqi forces fled. The lack of discipline and widespread corruption in Iraq's military led to it buckling under the brutality of ISIS. For years, soldiers were simply bribing their commanders to allow them to go home where they still collected a wage (BBC, 2014). ISIS not only took control of Iraq's second largest city, it also took control of a massive arsenal. Mosul was well stocked with heavy weapons ranging from T-72 tanks to stinger anti-aircraft missiles and HJ-8 anti-tank missiles (Bender, 2014). In the span of just two years, ISIS evolved from a battered jihadist group to a full-fledged state with a military comparable to a small country. These military successes were key for acquiring new recruits, and by 2015 over 30,000 people from 85 countries were fighting for the caliphate (Picker, 2016). This demonstrated a clear evolution from a covert jihadist organization to one capable of fighting on both conventional and guerrilla plains. While this allowed ISIS to graduate from a guerilla force it also made them a significantly larger target.

After taking control of Mosul, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi officially declared the creation of the caliphate that would now be known as the Islamic State (IS). Like any state, IS had a government, sources of income, public services, and security forces. Initially, IS governance was welcomed in some areas of Syria where the FSA was viewed as corrupt and inept. ISIS settled disputes and ensured basic public services such as garbage collection continued in the absence of the Syrian regime. IS also provided for schools and the upkeep of public spaces. For some communities, IS was their best option (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 164). Satellite data shows that economic development took place under IS rule with expanded markets and more street traffic in Mosul (Robinson et al., 2018). IS was also able to control power and route it to important buildings like hospitals, but failed to provide effective electricity to most of its territory.

This thin veneer of Islamic virtue would only last so long. IS soon implemented Sharia law and a set of harsh hudud punishments. Men were required to grow beards and women were forced to wear conservative outfits that covered them from head to toe. Public beheadings and floggings were carried out in city centers across the caliphate (Warrick, 2016, pp. 287-289). Stadiums were transformed into prisons and torture facilities where crimes as small as theft or smoking were potentially punishable by amputation or death (Malsin, 2017). Homosexuality was punished by being thrown off of a roof. IS also used other barbaric punishments such as crucifixion. These punishments terrified the West and kept IS subjects in line. IS created a variety of security forces and institutions to oversee the implementation of its version of Sharia. IS set up their own version of police that enforced religious laws and IS control. IS also created Al-Khansa brigades of female police, tasked with enforcing Sharia law on women (Kafanov, 2016). There was also an FBI-like force known as the Amniyat that was responsible for counter espionage and intelligence gathering (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 211). IS also set up Sharia courts to settle disputes and mete out punishments on its subjects. IS then moved to settle scores in Iraq. IS assassins and suicide bombers killed several of the tribal leaders who participated in the Anbar Awakening. IS recruited from the local tribes and then forced its new recruits to execute their resistant relatives (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, pp. 205-206). This meant that tribes

would be divided under IS rule and unable to effectively fight back. Through security forces and divide and rule tactics, IS solidified its rule against any Anbar Awakening type of uprising.

Funding such a massive operation with thousands of foreign fighters and state functions took a large economic effort. IS primarily funded itself in three ways: taxes and fines, oil, and the sale of seized goods and people. IS controlled large oil fields in Deir Ezzor that it used to keep its military functioning. IS also sold oil from these fields to foreign and black market buyers. Between 2014 and 2015, IS brought in over 450 million dollars in oil revenue that primarily benefited the organization's top leadership (Hoffman et al., 2016). Despite having control over power production and oil fields, satellite data shows that over 60% of all buildings across all of IS territory went without power (Robinson et al., 2018). People living in IS territory were also subject to hefty fines and taxation. Every shop and salary under IS jurisdiction could be taxed up to 50% in a taxation scheme known as Zakat (Robinson et al., 2018). In traditional Islam, Zakat is the act of giving alms that all Muslims are required to do. By naming taxation after this pillar of Islam, IS aimed to grant greater religious legitimacy to its policy that resembled robbery more than charity. Some government workers were still receiving their wages while under IS occupation, forcing the Iraqi government to cut them off (Robinson et al., 2018). This kept IS well supplied but also drove a wedge between IS and local populations. Finally, IS trafficked both stolen goods and people, predominantly women. Any valuables or non-Muslim women that IS came across were taken by the group and auctioned off in markets. IS fighters were allowed to buy goods at reduced prices and sex slaves for less than \$200 (Arraf, 2019). IS's strict control over all economic activity in its territory allowed it to generate funding that allows it to continue its terror today. When IS became hard pressed to maintain its forces, its economic control crushed local economies and made it hard to gain the population's support.

The employment of propaganda has been important for all terrorist organizations, especially IS. Since the times of AQI, propaganda has placed violence and other atrocities mixed with religious undertones at the forefront. Many videos have prominently shown IS fighters in combat in action movie like productions. Others show joyous fighters waving flags or driving armored vehicles around in celebration. These videos are not only meant to showcase the glory of fighting for IS but also the excitement of it, likening real war to that of Call of Duty and other video games with which many youths are familiar. IS specifically tailored its propaganda to appeal to disenfranchised Muslim youths in Europe and America that are familiar with gang crime and inner city life (Burke, 2017). IS skillfully used numerous social media accounts on sites like Twitter to publish propaganda, directly reach out to new recruits, and even solicit donations. While IS operatives encouraged people to come to the caliphate, they also encouraged them to take action in their own home territory if they were unable to join them in Syria and Iraq. The vast majority of attacks in western Europe and nearly all attacks in North America were inspired through IS outreach in some manner (Lister, 2018). IS also made sure to include women and sex slavery in their propaganda. This also served to attract young recruits with the allure of sexual exploits that were not just allowed, but encouraged by IS ideology (Ali, 2020). IS propaganda was key to attracting new recruits and allowing IS to strike deep into Western territory without having to use much of its own resources.

IS maintains that it has control over a range of provinces or "wilayat." These provinces mostly came about as a result of other Islamist groups pledging allegiance to Baghdadi. IS has provinces in Afghanistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Chechnya, Nigeria, Libya, and Tunisia. These groups became emboldened by the military success of IS, but all have so far failed to recreate it. Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines have come the closest

so far. Boko Haram has controlled small amounts of territory in Nigeria, but was ultimately driven back into the forests by the Nigeria military. The Abu Sayyaf captured the city of Marawi in May of 2017 proclaiming it as part of the caliphate. After several hard months of fighting, the Phillipine military pushed them out of the city at a great cost (SCMP, 2018). While these provinces are not true extensions of IS in Iraq and Syria, they still pose a threat as havens for Islamist extremism. They also demonstrate the appeal of IS' success. Extremist groups that have previously had trouble gaining notability or success grafted themselves on the IS brand to raise their profile and embolden their followers. These groups may now provide safe harbor for dangerous IS fighters fleeing Syria and Iraq, making these IS suspects harder to capture.

IS caught the attention of the world when it took control of Mosul, but when it began advancing towards the Kurdish capital of Erbil and Baghdad the international community took action. The US formed a coalition of Western and Middle Eastern nations to begin striking IS targets and supporting local forces like the Peshmerga and Syrian Democratic Forces. In August of 2014, US Navy fighter jets struck IS artillery positions and convoys in Iraq (Roberts & Ackerman, 2014). Strikes continued to intensify, and by mid 2015, US forces claimed to have destroyed over 16,000 IS targets (@CJTFOIR, 2015). However, The US led coalition would not have been able to defeat IS without the cooperation of local forces who fought on the ground.

Iraqi and Peshmerga forces worked together to push IS out of Iraq. By December 2015, Iraqi forces reclaimed Ramadi less than a year after it was lost. In June of 2016, Fallujah was also liberated from IS control. In October, Syrian forces captured Dabiq and struck a major blow to IS ideology and propaganda. Without Dabiq, IS could no longer claim to be bringing about the end times prophesied in the Hadith. Later, in October, Iraqi forces began their push towards Mosul, Iraq's second largest city. The battle for Mosul took several months and countless lives. Iraqi and Kurdish forces began by liberating outlying minority villages, and then moved into the city, they were met by heavy resistance. Building to building fighting lasted for months until IS forces made their final stand in Mosul's old city and Al-Nuri Mosque. In July of 2017, Iraqi forces took full control of the city effectively ending the IS caliphate in Iraq (Wilson Center, 2019). The Iraqi military benefitted from having support from several well organized fighting groups that included the Kurdish Peshmerga and Iranian backed Popular Mobilization Forces that helped to retake territory along with US air cover. In October 2017, SDF and US forces captured the Deir Ezzor oil fields and Raqqa from IS. Fighting against IS in Raqqa was heavy and required the extensive use of air strikes and artillery, thus effectively leveling the city (Malsin, 2017). Raqqa was not retaken by government forces, but by Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition led by Kurds but comprising many different militant groups. In the final days of the battle, local IS fighters struck a deal with the SDF so that they and their families would be allowed safe passage out of the city. This deal specifically excluded foreign IS fighters who were left in the city for American and SDF forces to eliminate (France24, 2017). By November, Iraqi and Syrian forces officially declared that they defeated IS in their territories. In February 2019, SDF forces encircled the last remnants of the caliphate in Baghouz and finally destroyed them (Wilson Center, 2019). In the dark of night on October 26th, 2019, an American assault force of Delta Force operators descended on a compound in northern Syria. Intelligence from Baghdadi's security advisor, including DNA, was used to confirm his presence. One of Baghdadi's captured wives as well as Kurdish and Iraqi intelligence units made substantial contributions to the raid. Upon entering the compound, they discovered Abu Bakr al-Bhagdadi and pursued him into an underground tunnel where he detonated a suicide vest, killing him and two of his children (Walcott, 2019). While his death and the destruction of the caliphate are major milestones, the

fight against IS is far from finished. IS has continued to conduct terrorist attacks from hiding places in the desert just as it did after the Anbar Awakening.

The Islamic State was clearly not the junior varsity team President Obama joked about. It successfully cultivated a large group of fighters and evolved into a state-like organization. For a time, things were going well for IS. As IS evolved from a covert group to an overt one, the challenges it faced changed and multiplied. IS may have had tanks and even some surface to air missiles which allowed them to effectively fight weakened Syrian and Iraqi armies, but IS lacked the training and equipment to combat their more powerful patrons like the United States. US airstrikes were able to easily destroy the Islamic State's military forces. Where the US deployed advanced fighter aircraft, IS could only deploy store bought drones; there was simply no contest. Terrorist groups can only evolve so much in the modern age in comparison to professional militaries. IS may have been one of the world's most powerful terrorist organizations, but when compared to professional state armies, it failed to measure up to its adversaries. Just as it failed to measure up in military terms, it also failed to function like a proper government. In the beginning, IS tried to effectively carry out state functions like running schools and public utilities, but this did not last long. IS was responsible for millions of people, but as the war went on they provided less and less for them while taking more and more. IS was unable to properly attend to the needs of a civilian population and fight a war at the same time. IS oppressed its population in an effort to command compliance rather than win hearts and minds in the interest of popular legitimacy. After IS took control of territory, it continued to function like a hostile occupation rather than a government acting in the interests of its people. IS lacked the true support structure and legitimacy of a real state, undermining their ability to rally subjects to its aid at critical moments. IS may have developed an army and administered territory, but it never truly became a state, much less a nation. IS clearly failed to learn that winning hearts and minds are important to a war effort and state formation.

It is important to understand how the Islamic State adapts both its form and ideology to best suit its circumstances. When Syria fell into chaos, IS capitalized on the situation to capture territory and equipment. They then seized on cracks in Iraq's security structure to do the same there. When coalition forces beat IS back, it did not implode, but moved to a lower and more covert form of warfare. This allows it to evade its adversaries, continue fighting, and regroup. IS did this in the past after the Anbar Awakening and came back stronger than ever, a distinct possibility for the future. IS also manipulates its religious ideology to reflect its material realities. IS leaders now claim that the loss of the caliphate is not a result of their failings, but a test from Allah. This allows it to retain its more religiously inclined followers and remain ideologically relevant. Not everyone believes this, and a small portion of former IS members believe the caliphate was destroyed after falling out of Allah's favor as a result of its extreme brutality (Bunzel, 2019). While IS might try, its perverse ideology only convinces a minority of Muslims. IS is battered, but it is not completely defeated, and as long as it can continue to evolve to effectively match its circumstances, it will continue to pose a threat to the world.

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