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**ISIS: THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE MESSIANIC
VIOLENT NON-STATE ACTOR IN SYRIA**

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ISIS: THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE MESSIANIC VIOLENT NON-STATE
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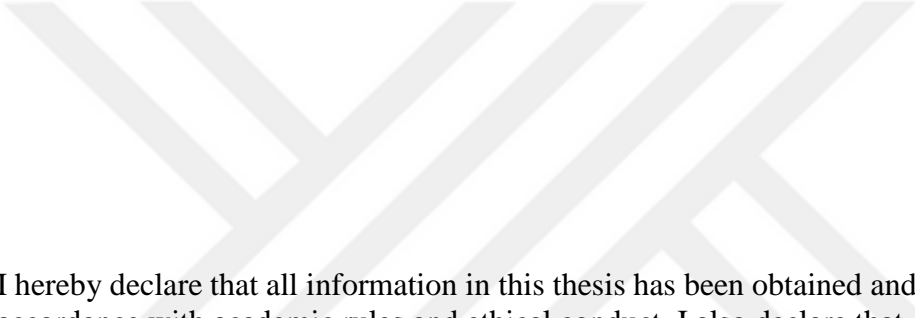
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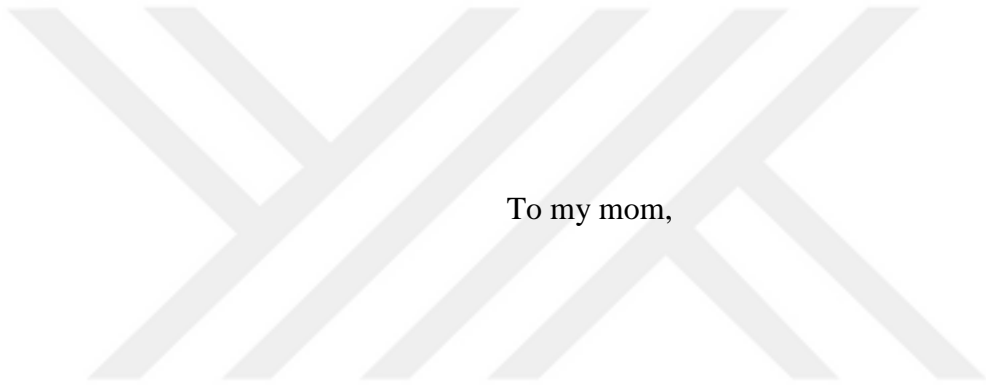
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Ufuk Ulutaş



To my mom,

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQM	Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia
ASC	Anbar Salvation Council
CAIR	Council on American–Islamic Relations
FSA	Free Syrian Army
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
JASJ	Jaysh Al-Sunna w’Al-Jamaat
JTJ	Jamaat Al-Tawhid w’al-Jihad
MSC	Mujahedeen Shura Council
NSA	Non-State Actors
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê</i>)
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
VNSA	Violent Non-State Actors
YPG	People's Protection Units (<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i>)

1. Introduction

ISIS has come under the spotlight and gained an unexpected amount of publicity in the last few years mostly because of its expansion: largely due to the failed state in Iraq and the Syrian crisis. However, ISIS is a terrorist group with insurgent qualities which has a track record of activity in the Middle East spanning the last two decades. Its ideological roots date back to the jihad in Afghanistan, and the Iraq War played a significant role in crystalizing its ideology which has exceeded that of Al-Qaeda's in terms of its radicalism and extremism. The group has operated under different names in the Middle East, and differed from most of the other terrorist organizations by establishing an expansive territorial control in Iraq and Syria thanks to the vacuum created by the sectarian rule of Al-Maliki in Iraq and the uprising in Syria, precipitated by the brutal crackdown of the Assad regime. In comparison with other terrorist organizations, ISIS has established a highly hierarchical bureaucracy with functioning branches from security to education and social services¹, and gained an access to rich financial resources which consequently made the group the richest of its kind. In other words, its weakened and invisible standing in the Middle East due to the "Sahwa councils"² during the later periods of the invasion of Iraq changed dramatically, and it has become the number one threat in the eyes of the Western world as well as regional actors in the Middle East.

While ISIS went underground and maintained a low profile temporarily in Iraq, it first consolidated its manpower through participations and recruitment from the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda, Jabhat Al-Nusra, then opted to fight against the Syrian insurgents to expand its territorial control in Syria. Meanwhile, it avoided clashes with the Assad regime whenever possible, even in areas with strategic importance, in order to not divide its fighting power and to establish itself as a strong VNSA in Syria. In this process, the regime

¹ For a discussion on violent non-state actors' use of social services, see Grynkewich, A G. Welfare as Warfare: How Violent Non-State Groups Use Social Services to Attack the State. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2008, 31(4): 350–370

² The Sahwa (Awakening) Councils are tribal militia in Iraq that was composed of Sunni fighters which was established- with US support- to bolster security in their areas and fight against Al-Qaeda.

found that it could make use of ISIS in their fight against the Syrian insurgents. That is, ISIS was targeting the Syrian insurgents, diminishing their energy and ammunition, and forcing them to fight on simultaneous fronts. Additionally, the entrance of ISIS to Syria also damaged how the insurgents' were perceived in the international public opinion which the regime had been unsuccessful in achieving by itself. This led the two parties, the regime and ISIS, to find a modus vivendi, and establish a mutually beneficial relationship that would last till today.

ISIS gained its current publicity in the international media with the quick capture of the second largest city in Iraq, Mosul. Thanks to the huge amount of financial resources and military equipment that ISIS gained in Mosul, it jumped up a level in terms of its organizational capacity and became the richest as well as militarily strongest VNSA in the world. This and the pornography of violence which it services through its media branches turned ISIS into the number one enemy of the international community. The Obama administration, for example, which opted out of any kind of military intervention in Syria, even after its redlines were crossed with the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, started a military campaign together with an international coalition when ISIS captured the strategically unimportant town of Kobane on the border with Turkey. Local actors, ironically, have found an invaluable opportunity in this war against ISIS by availing themselves for the fight thereby achieving two basic goals: mustering support from the international community and gaining legitimacy in the eyes of both local populations and the international community. In this manner, the PKK's Syrian branch YPG and Hashd Al-Shaabi (People's Mobilization Forces), which is under heavy Iranian influence, have fought against ISIS, supported by the United States and other coalition member states. The US buried old enmities with several Iraqi insurgent groups, such as Asaib Ahl-al-Haq, and ignored the fact that some of the groups which receive US help, including the YPG, have strong links with the groups that the US themselves have designated as terrorist organizations. Many actors including the US argue that the priority in fighting should be given to defeating ISIS, ignoring the root causes and the fertile ground on which ISIS has consolidated its power in Syria and Iraq; consequently Iran, the Assad regime and the YPG

have benefited greatly from this strategy by expanding their spheres of influences and territorial control.

ISIS expanded its numbers rapidly thanks to the incoming foreign fighters from more than a hundred states from all corners of the world creating one of the largest armies, in terms of its manpower, in Iraq and Syria. It has also maintained territorial control over an area in Iraq and Syria that is effectively larger than some of the nation-states in the Middle East and elsewhere. Although ISIS has lost a considerable amount of territory in Iraq and Syria, since the beginning of the coalition airstrikes, it still controls a large portion of land along the Syria-Iraq border, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and the areas along the Euphrates River up to north of Aleppo in Syria; Mosul and the stretch of land between the Syrian border along the Tigris River deep into the province of Nineveh in Iraq. As of today, the international coalition and various local groups are preparing or already executing a ground and air operation against ISIS in Mosul and Felucca in Iraq; in Raqqa, Manbij and the area between the Euphrates and Azez in North Syria. The YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are currently fighting against ISIS in the countryside of Aleppo near Manbij with the air cover of the United States. The Syrian insurgents are the ones who initiated the war against ISIS in the first place, in the earlier phases of the ISIS enterprise in Syria. They have been fighting against ISIS almost incessantly for the past three years and are currently clashing with the group north of Aleppo, East Qalamun and Deraa. In Iraq, the Peshmerga Forces, the Iraqi Army and the Hashd Al-Shaabi militias are continuing their fight against ISIS again with air support from the international coalition.

ISIS is not solely operating in Iraq and Syria. To the contrary, after consolidating its power in these countries and winning sensational victories in an astonishingly rapid manner, groups of varying sizes pledged allegiance to ISIS in Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Afghanistan, Northern Caucasus and Nigeria. Outside Iraq and Syria it only has territorial control in Libya and Nigeria; however, its sympathizers stretch all the way from Australia to the United States. The group has attracted thousands of foreign fighters from all around the world to join their ranks; and after the start of the coalition airstrikes and mobilization of the international community, ISIS sent some of its militants back to their countries of origin, such as France, Turkey, Belgium, the United States,

Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, where they continue to plot terrorist attacks. In this sense, ISIS is a group which has the capacity to carry out terrorist attacks globally either through its militants or sympathizers. This emphasizes the point that the fight against ISIS should not be limited to Iraq and Syria where the group openly operates, but using a variety of methods must be expanded to a larger geography with a strong coordination within the international community.

Media and propaganda have a significant place in ISIS' strategy of terror, and the group use all communication channels especially the social media to disseminate their messages. Through Hollywood-style propaganda productions and an army of users on Twitter and Facebook, ISIS clarified its ideology and aims, while trying to recruit more people. Even though there is an overwhelming volume of open sources to analyze the world of ISIS, these do not suffice to write a balanced and insightful analysis about the group. One of the reasons for this is the perception that ISIS cannot be analyzed through information and sources which the group intentionally disseminate. Furthermore, ISIS has undeclared aims and partnerships which further complicate understanding of its operation and rationale. ISIS which derived inspiration from its forefather, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, in shaping its violent agenda and operational methods has established pragmatic relationships with a number of actors, including Saddam era officers and the Assad regime; therefore, to adequately explain ISIS, one must transcend the popular narrative that has been circulating in the international media. There are numerous conspiracy theories regarding the establishment, expansion and operation of ISIS in the Middle East, a region where such theories abound. The main reason, probably, for the abundance of questions about the personal connections of its leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the group's ties with foreign intelligence agencies etc., is the unbelievably fast expansion of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, causing paradigm shifts and changing the game plan of many actors on the ground.

1.1. Literature Review

ISIS in its current form is a new phenomenon, although the group has a long history

of terrorist activity and insurgency. After its rapid rise to power in Iraq and Syria, several works have been dedicated to the understanding of the organisation; however, the very nature of the group has restricted the scope of research and availability of original materials on ISIS. Most of the works have focused on the history of the group in an effort to acquaint the Western reader with the basics of its growth and transformation. This effort has mostly been borne out of a need to make sense of an organization which has dominated international news outlets with its use of violence, control of vast territory and claim for statehood. Again most of the studies conducted on ISIS are journalistic pieces, usually bringing together- some of them very chaotically- chronological developments regarding the group.

Efforts to go deeper in understanding ISIS and the use of primary sources are both rare. Difficulty in conducting research or journalistic activities in ISIS controlled areas, scarcity of sources except for those disseminated by the group mostly for propagandistic purposes, as well as the overwhelming domination of rumors and non-factual data have made studies on ISIS a herculean task. ISIS has not been a journalist or researcher-friendly group, and as a matter of fact, many journalists such as Steven Sotloff, were executed in cold blood by the group. Therefore, field research is almost out of the question due to its security risks when analyzing the group. This has left researchers with only a few options to collect data on the group, interviews with ISIS members or sympathizers being the most valuable asset to researchers. There are unfortunately not many studies which base their narrative, analysis and findings on in-depth interviews. As much as ISIS has a high amount of publicity, not enough academic attention has been paid so far to its study. This is probably because of the limitations that researchers face when doing research about ISIS as well as the complex nature of the group.

Amongst dozens of books on ISIS in English, only two stand out with their on-the-ground research, although both of them are predominantly journalistic pieces, lacking an academic framework and theoretical discussion. Nevertheless, both offer invaluable, on-the-ground accounts of the group. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* by Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan deals exclusively with ISIS, making extensive use of interviews and

available primary sources.³ The book is particularly successful in portraying the Iraqi link of ISIS and the modus vivendi between the group and the Assad regime. It offers valuable insights into the inner structure and web of relations of ISIS both in Iraq and Syria, where the Al-Maliki and Assad rules prepared the ground for the return of the group's reign of terror. Charles Leister's *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*⁴ is more of a general reader about the Syrian uprising than a monograph exclusively discussing ISIS. The book presents a general picture of the uprising with details and anecdotes, while positioning ISIS in the wider conflict in Syria.

Three other works which offer more focused and compartmentalized analysis of ISIS deserve mentioning here. Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger's *ISIS: The State of Terror* (2015) is particularly invaluable for its discussion of the terror aspect of ISIS. The book skillfully compares ISIS with Al-Qaeda, and argues that ISIS' message is more concrete and appealing than Al-Qaeda's which explains why ISIS could attract more people and began dominating the global jihadi networks. ISIS, unlike Al-Qaeda, offers its potential recruits a nascent utopia which came true with the declaration of the ISIS caliphate.⁵ William McCants' *ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*⁶ is again a focused study dealing extensively with the group's apocalyptic vision, and how this vision shapes the group's terror strategy. McCants demonstrates his great expertise on apocalyptic politics, and deciphers the messianic roots of ISIS ideology. Loretta Napoleoni's *The Islamist Phoenix: The Islamic State (ISIS) and the Redrawing of the Middle East*⁷ is based mostly on journalistic accounts on ISIS; nevertheless offers valuable insights into the group's unique position among other terrorist organizations. It is particularly successful in arguing that ISIS is not an ordinary terrorist group which the West can tackle with conventional methods. Napoleoni argues that ISIS offers a new model for "nation building" by using modern and unconventional methods including high-tech.

³ Hassan H. and Weiss M. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015)

⁴ Lister, C. *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

⁵ Stern, J., Berger, J.M. *In ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2015)

⁶ McCants, W. *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015)

⁷ Napoleoni, L., *The Islamist Phoenix: The Islamic State (ISIS) and the Redrawing of the Middle East* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2014)

However, besides the book's detailed account of ISIS' nature as a terror group it offers little about the organization's inner workings and ideological roots of its strategy of terror.

In addition to the books in English, one must mention an invaluable book written in Arabic by Hisham Hashimi, an expert on Iraqi jihadi groups. In *'Alam Daesh*,⁸ Hashimi offers valuable insights into ISIS' roots in Afghanistan and organizational evolution in Iraq. He travels back to 1980's to seek Al-Qaeda's roots in the Soviet-Afghan War; talks in detail about AQI, Mujahedeen Shura Council and ISI; and analyzes ISI's transformation into ISIS. The book compares the Iraqi and Syrian contexts to explain differences within the Salafi-jihadi groups in both countries. He particularly highlights the divergences between Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda as well as between Al-Baghdadi and Al-Golani. *'Alam Daesh* also gives apt space to the discussion of military strategies of ISIS and organizational structure of the group as well as a biography of its leader, Al-Baghdadi. In the last chapter, Hashimi gives recommendations to combat ISIS terror militarily, ideologically and financially. The book is a very detailed account of ISIS; however, it is highly centered on ISIS in Iraq and fails to address the group's presence and activities in Syria.

1.2. Contributions

The significance of this study derives from its contribution to the existing literature on ISIS in three levels. Firstly, only a few minor studies (for example: Valensi, 2015) have so far attempted to utilize the ISIS case to test the validity of international relations theories and explain non-state phenomenon. This study however will approach ISIS from a theoretical –mostly constructivist- perspective to explain its ontology and operations. In addition, the ISIS case will be used to highlight the boundaries of the state and non-state actors as discussed by dominant IR theories. Secondly, this study is based on field research, primary sources in several languages and numerous in-depth interviews with various actors on the ground. Years of research have been conducted inside Syria; in the border towns of Hatay, Gaziantep and Kilis; in Ankara and Istanbul; in Qatar, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan,

⁸Al-Hashimi H., *عالم داعش*. (Baghdad: Dar Al-Babel, 2015) p. 285

United States, Belgium and France. Interviews in person, over VOIP services, phone and email, as well as via intermediaries were conducted with ISIS militants and affiliates, members of Syrian armed opposition from different groups with a wide range of ideological backgrounds, members of the Syrian political opposition, as well as with personal acquaintances of ISIS leader Al-Baghdadi and residents of the ISIS heartlands of Mosul and Raqqa. Thirdly, the study will offer insights on the understanding of the Syrian conflict by crystalizing the sides of the conflict and rightly underlining ISIS' role in the conflict. ISIS is neither a pro-opposition nor an anti-Assad group, and confinement of ISIS to the predominant polarization of the Syrian conflict between the regime and the insurgents is essentially a dead end when trying to make sense of the group. This also has implications for the efficiency of the war on ISIS, as an efficient tackling of the ISIS problem requires deconstructing its ideology as well as its behavioral patterns in the conflict zone inside Syria.

1.3. Research Questions

This study aims to answer three main research questions by using extensive field research, interviews and content analysis.

- I. **Can ISIS be considered as a State or a Violent Non-State Actor?:** Despite recent losses, the vast amount of territory that ISIS controls, the sophisticated method of governance in these territory, its civilian and military bureaucratic structures, economic activities as well as the considerable number of people living under ISIS rule make categorization of ISIS as an entity a colossal task. The fact that the group calls itself a state also adds to the already complicated nature of ISIS. Although ISIS retains features of both state and non-state actors, its categorization requires delving into the group's inner workings as well as approaching the group from a more theoretical perspective.

II. What are the historical and ideological codes of ISIS' terror strategy?:

Although ISIS in its current form is a relatively new phenomenon, one can trace its ideological and organizational roots back to the long-lasting presence of the Salafi-jihadis in various conflict zones. Its evolution from a tiny group of foreign fighters into a state-like structure, crystallization of its ideology through experimentation on the ground, and codification of its strategy of terror by key ideologues are all worth due analyses. The group's ideological and organizational history is key to understanding its current structure, approaches and endgame.

III. What is the position of ISIS in the current matrix of conflicting parties in

Syria?: The Syrian crisis started with peaceful demonstrations and turned into an armed uprising due to the regime's brutal handling of the demonstrations. In the early phases, there were only two conflicting parties: the regime and the opposition. In time, however, not only the opposition groups became divided ideologically, operationally and ethnically, but also international intervention turned the crisis into a proxy war. States as well as non-state actors came into the picture which ultimately blurred the matrix of conflicting parties in Syria. Diverse groups of the opposition and the regime with its various allies are still the main combatants. ISIS, however, with its own agenda and priorities, has a unique position with regard to both the opposition and the regime. One could only position ISIS in its real spot in Syria by analyzing its operational past, ideological features and relations with other actors.

1.4. Methodology and data collection

In this study, qualitative research methods are used. The qualitative research is the “non-numerical assessment of observations made through participant observation, content

analysis, in-depth interviews, and other qualitative research techniques.”⁹ It is used to discover underlying meanings and patterns of relationships. It first generates a general research question, selects relevant sites and subjects, collects relevant data, interprets data, creates a conceptual and theoretical framework and produces research conclusions.¹⁰ This study first generated the three main research questions listed above, and selected Syria as the geographical scope of the research and ISIS militants, sympathizers and political and armed groups clashing with ISIS as the main subjects. To collect data, this study mostly used in-depth interviews to deepen the understanding of ISIS by compiling the feelings and opinions of various actors who are either part of or exposed to ISIS on the ground. In-depth interviews were conducted mostly in Arabic with the use of a semi-structured questionnaire that had both open and closed ended questions. The framework questions in the questionnaire are the following:

- 1- What is the ultimate goal of ISIS in Syria?
- 2- What is the role of ISIS’ unique understanding of religion in its political and military strategy?
- 3- Do you think ISIS is a state? If not, how would you define it structurally?
- 4- What are the key components of ISIS?
- 5- What is the role of Saddam era officers inside ISIS’ power structure?
- 6- What kind of a role do the tribes play in ISIS in Syria?
- 7- What is the ethnic distribution of ISIS in Syria?
- 8- What is the role of foreign fighters in ISIS in Syria?
- 9- What is the nature of relations between different branches of ISIS decision making mechanisms?
- 10- Does ISIS have popular support or a sociological basis in Syria?
- 11- How does the group finance itself? What are its key financial resources?
- 12- What is their military strategy?
- 13- Where does ISIS get its arms from?

⁹ Babbie, E., *Practice of Social Research* (Canada: Wadsworth, 2013) p. 389

¹⁰ Bryman, A., *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 384

14- What is the nature of ISIS' relations with various groups within the Syrian armed opposition and the regime?

15- Where do you position ISIS in the Syrian conflict?

16- Do you think ISIS is supported by foreign governments and/or intelligence agencies?

Due to the nature of ISIS and the security situation inside Syria, the interviews were approached in several ways. When possible, the interviews were conducted in person. The remainder were carried out using VOIP services, phone, emails or intermediaries. The factual contents of the answers were cross-checked, and personal opinions and feelings were carefully noted. Most interviewees currently or previously affiliated with ISIS turned down our interview requests due to security concerns, but some of them agreed to answer our questions after ensuring their anonymity. Their responses to the questionnaire enriched this study by bringing the ISIS worldview into picture. An invaluable source of information on the structure and worldview of ISIS were the Syrian insurgents, especially those who have either previous or current experience in the jihadi circles. In this sense, although noting the animosity and rivalry between ISIS and the Syrian insurgents, Jabhat Al-Nusra affiliated interviewees and other insurgents with jihadi backgrounds fighting in groups such as Ahrar Al-Sham and Jaysh Al-Islam etc. have brought invaluable insights on the advent of ISIS in Syria in general as well as the groups' military, religious and political views. In addition to the in-depth interviews with the military actors on the ground, several other interviews were also conducted with the Syrian political opposition, international actors handling the Syrian file in both the West and the Middle East, diplomats and researchers.

In addition to the in-depth interviews, content analysis of several key sermons and statements as well as written material that has deeply influence ISIS' ideological and organizational structure was also utilized. Content analysis is "an approach to the analysis of documents and texts (which may be printed or visual) that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner."¹¹ It is a "technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified

¹¹ Ibid. p. 289

characteristics of messages.”¹² In this study, the content of two major understudied publications, one in Arabic and the other in English, were analyzed to answer the main research questions. First one, *Management of Savagery* by Abu Bakr Naji, is an invaluable work in understanding ISIS’ strategy of terror. The second one is the English-language journal of ISIS, *Dabiq*, which not only signifies the messianic nature of the group but also updates the reader on ISIS’ developing strategies and ideological evolution.

This research used both purposive and snowballing samplings when doing in-depth interviews. Purposive sampling is a non-probability form of sampling which samples its cases/participants in a strategic way so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed.¹³ Snowball sampling, on the other hand, is a “technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research.”¹⁴ In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with top level commanders of the armed groups, major political opposition figures as well as people with direct information about key ISIS figures. Also, while doing field work in Syria and on the Turkey-Syria border to conduct interviews with previously specified figures, additional interviews were also conducted with people proposed by initial interviewees.

In order to gauge the intensity of fighting and nature of relations between the Syrian armed opposition and ISIS, and the regime and ISIS; and also to determine ISIS’ position with regard to the Syrian conflict, a data set was created by this author listing the sequence of territorial control in a specific location by key parties on the ground. The data of ISIS’ territorial possessions and the patterns based on the question “Who did ISIS capture the territory from?” were created. In this manner, a sequence of territorial possessions has been demonstrated. This sequence starts with the regime’s control (R) of the whole of Syria before the beginning of the armed uprising. After the insurgency started the armed opposition (O) captured geographically scattered territory from the regime. Starting from

¹² Holsti, O. R., *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969) p. 14

¹³ Bryman, A., *Social Research Methods*. p. 418

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 424

the early periods when ISIS (I) got involved in the Syrian conflict, it turned against the armed opposition and captured territory from them through fighting and allegiances it received from the groups and tribes which previously fought in the ranks of the armed opposition. At its height, ISIS had an indirect or direct control of more than 40% of the Syrian territory, and the majority of that territory- around 885- was captured in the sequence of $R \Rightarrow O \Rightarrow I$; while $R \Rightarrow I$ sequence is measured around %12. This data is particularly important to make sense of ISIS' expansion strategy in Syria, and also the nature of its relations with the battling actors on the ground.

1.5.Limitations

As much as it is rewarding, doing research on a terror group as ISIS has many limitations. It goes without saying that doing field-work in ISIS territory is not only dangerous but also has fatal consequences. In addition to its dangerous nature, travelling to ISIS-controlled territory is not legally permissible therefore research could not be conducted in territory currently controlled by ISIS. Instead, this study made use of interviews with ISIS militants and sympathizers over the phone, through VOIP services and emails.

The above mentioned limitation also created difficulties in sampling since only a small number of interviewees made themselves available for interviews due to issues of trust, security concerns or technical limitations. Conducting an interview with a member of a designated terrorist organization is always difficult for the researcher and the interviewee; while the researcher is aiming to get as direct and explanatory answers as possible, the interviewee tries to send his message but also preserve his confidentiality. The two do not always go hand in hand, and this mismatch created further limitations for the author.

The secretive nature of ISIS poses another limitation to any researcher working on the group as many of their activities are not made public, not shared with outsiders, and kept only amongst a select group of people. This is also true for the militants who are not at the core structure of the group but move in the periphery. It should be borne in mind that

not every single ISIS militant has the same motivation, background and expectations when joining ISIS. Many of them have differing experiences and varying involvement in the decision-making; therefore, share different -even conflicting- accounts about the same events.

Another limitation comes from the fact that almost all parties involved in the Syrian conflict have strong ideas about ISIS. The on-going clashes, ISIS' brutal strategy of terror, suicide bombings, oppressive rule and its role in legitimizing the Assad regime make many actors on the ground quite subjective about the group. This study therefore cross-checked every single claim and left out unsubstantiated strong opinions with regard to ISIS.

1.6. Study Plan

One can deal with ISIS from various perspectives; however, this study will focus principally on the group's presence and activities in Syria, and on the role the Syrian crisis had in the transformation of the group. Having said this, considering the fact that there is a strong connection between ISIS' activities in Syria and elsewhere, especially in Iraq, this study will inevitably transcend the borders of Syria and bring other countries into the picture. After the introduction, the second chapter of the study will discuss ISIS within the general framework of the non-state actors, specifically the violent non-state actors. The chapter will begin with the discussion of the NSA and VNSA in international relations theories, and question the relevance of the NSA in the international system. This chapter will demonstrate that classical IR theories fall short of fully explaining the emergence, expansion as well as current operations of ISIS as a VNSA, controlling contingent territory in two nation-states in which millions of people live. Realist paradigm's neglect of the non-state actors and liberalism's over emphasis on economic motives in the formation of the NSA make these two approaches highly irrelevant in the case of ISIS. Constructivism is best placed to deconstruct the ISIS phenomenon as ideology plays a critical role in shaping ISIS' strategies and endgame. After providing a brief literature review on the VNSA and finding an overall definition of the term, the chapter will assess ISIS to see to what extent it

fits into the VNSA category. As will be discussed, there are common areas as well as divergences between the qualities of the VNSA and ISIS. Notwithstanding, ISIS should still be considered as a VNSA with additional qualities, some of which normally only states possess.

ISIS came into being predominantly as an Iraqi phenomenon with Syria having a transformative effect on the group. In this sense, the third chapter will seek the ideological and operational roots of ISIS in Iraq during the American invasion. There is surely an older history starting from the Afghan War in the 1980's; however, the institutionalization of the predecessors of ISIS and the crystallization of ISIS ideology coincide with the years of American invasion in Iraq. During these years, ISIS in different names morphed into an Iraqi-dominated group, while still receiving foreign fighters thanks to the Assad regime's facilitation, forming alliances with some tribes and Saddam era officers. These alliances and the Iraqi domination of the group would prove to be critical in shaping ISIS' institutional identity and conduct. This chapter will also give a first-hand account of ISIS' leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. His life story starting from his ideologically formative years in the Islamic University in Baghdad until his ascension to the leadership position in ISIS gives unique insights on both organizational and ideological structure of the group. His rapid promotion within the ranks of the key jihadi movement is a striking example of upward mobility as it took him only around 5 years, after his release from the notorious Camp Bucca as an insignificant detainee, to become the leader of the jihadi enterprise in Iraq.

The fourth chapter will decode the ideological properties of ISIS by analyzing four key points. The first part will attempt to decipher the ideological roots of ISIS' terror strategy by examining an influential book, *Management of Savagery*, by Abu Bakr Naji. The book is frequently quoted by the ideologues of the group, and the violent strategy it offers finds echoes in ISIS' terror strategy. The next part will delve into the concept of "takfirism", the practice of excommunicating other Muslims, which ISIS use to get a license for killing rivals who are Muslims. ISIS has a strong messianic belief that shapes the group's understanding of the world and its strategies. Therefore, the next part will seek the messianic roots of ISIS phenomenon, while also exploring the messianic component in

ISIS' terror strategy. The last part will explain how central the concept of the caliphate is to ISIS ideology and what the caliphate entails as an endgame for the ISIS enterprise.

The fifth chapter will go deep into the organizational profile of ISIS by paying special attention to its militant profile. This chapter will delineate the hierarchy of the group, and question what this hierarchy means for the group's operations both inside and outside Syria. The group has a generally accepted organizational structure with Al-Baghdadi at the head and coming under him his deputies in Syria, Iraq and several councils who deal with various tasks. The frequent death of military and political leaders of ISIS leads to constant change making it difficult to keep track of the current leadership, and this chapter will demonstrate that -except for a few figures- system is more important than individuals. Having said this, it should be noted that the power games inside ISIS as well as its hierarchical structure are very sophisticated, and it would be wrong to approach ISIS solely as a military body. The role of foreign fighters in ISIS and motivations for joining the group will also be addressed by referring to the ideological codes of the group, discussing the nature of the Syrian crisis and the pragmatic reasons that some of the recruits have when joining ISIS. This chapter will discuss pulling and pushing factors, as well as the opportunities for and causes of the foreign fighter phenomenon that has been dominating the cadres of ISIS. It will also deal with the question of to what extent previous religious indoctrination is important for the new recruits, shedding light on the level of religious education amongst them.

ISIS' transition into Syria was a critical step in terms of the transformation of the group from a low-profile insurgency into a transnational insurgent-terrorist organization with statehood claims. The last chapter will decipher the codes of this transformation by focusing on ISIS' encounter and clashes with the Syrian armed opposition, and its complex and tacit ties with the Assad regime. This chapter will demonstrate that, as wrongly argued by many observers; ISIS is not a part of the Syrian insurgency against the Assad regime. Rather, it maintained a separate agenda from the Syrian armed opposition which has been trying to topple the Assad regime but stay within the existing system. ISIS, to the contrary, rejects the system both politically and territorially in its entirety, and aims to establish a caliphate which has no geographical constraints and limits. Syria, therefore, has not been

central to its endgame, although certain localities inside Syria such as Dabiq retain messianic importance according to ISIS' ideology. ISIS' modus vivendi with the Assad regime and the fact that it has fought more with the Syrian armed opposition rather than the regime also position the group under a unique category in the complex matrix of fighting sides in Syria.



2. Conceptualization: The Violent Non-State Actors (VNSA) and IR Theories

“Terrorism, like theater, is a competition for audience. Shocking events are designed to capture attention, polarize, and provoke overreactions from their targets.”

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

The rise of the militant group calling itself a state (ISIS) controlling a territory stretching from Iraq to Syria has sparked much controversy not only among scholars studying the crises in these two countries, but also among the scholars who have been working on the role of the non-state actors (NSA) in the international system. In addition to the theoretical uniqueness of the ISIS phenomenon, the very evolution of the group from an armed insurgency in Iraq, with organizational roots in the insurgency in Afghanistan, triggered much discussion as well as confusion in categorizing entities which are not recognized states, but claiming to be and actually operating as one. Except for an important necessity of international recognition, several qualities of ISIS make the group more than a non-state actor, and it can probably be listed under a middle category between states and the NSA. The group's expansive control of territory from the province of Nineveh in Iraq to Syria's north stretching until the Turkish-Syrian border; management of some sort of a civilian government dealing with several sectors ranging from finance to education, and its widespread use of violence make the group's categorization rather difficult. On the other hand, it surely retains many properties of the NSA. In this sense, ISIS is an opportune case to explore the boundaries of non-state actors in the international system as well as studying the limitations of using states as the main unit of analysis.

This chapter will discuss ISIS within the general framework of the non-state actors, specifically the violent non-state actors. The chapter will begin with the discussion of the NSA and VNSA and continue with discussion of the relevance of the NSA in the international system. After carrying out a brief literature review on the VNSA and making

an overall definition of the term, the chapter will assess ISIS to see to what extent it fits into the VNSA category.

2.1. Violent Non-State Actors

The study of the NSA is a wide and essentially contested area and it is difficult to find a common and clear definition about the NSA, regardless of whether it is violent or non-violent. Josselin and Wallace define non-state actors as organizations “largely or entirely autonomous from central government funding and control; emanating from civil society, or from the market economy, or from political impulses beyond state control and direction. The NSA operate to “affect political outcomes, either within one or more states or within international institutions, either purposefully or semi- purposefully, either as their primary objective or as one aspect of their activities.”¹⁵ According to another definition by Chaudhry, the NSA are organizations which “participate or act in international relations, hold sufficient power to influence and cause a change even though they do not belong to any established institution of a state.”¹⁶ For Idler and Forest, the NSA- regardless of being violent or non-violent- are actors who have power over a local populace and often play by a different set of rules than the formal governments of nation-states.¹⁷ The NSA therefore command power among a populace but act differently than one would expect from a nation-state in the sense that they create their own rules and conduct, making strategic decisions in pursuit of their own self interests.

Violence is an important characteristic of some NSAs as they use violence against their foes including civilians. The use of violence in the context of civil wars especially- as the one in Syria- is a contested topic. The conventional understanding of violence suggests the irrationality of the use of violence; while scholars such as Stathis Kalyvas argues that violence is “not a haphazard process, it is rather a regulated one, taking place in sequential

¹⁵ Josselin D. and Wallace W., eds., *Non-state Actors in World Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ Chaudhry R., Violent Non-State Actors: Contours, Challenges and Consequences, *CLAWS Journal*, Winter 2013, p. 163

¹⁷ Idler, A.I. & Forest, J.J.F., (2015). Behavioral Patterns among (Violent) Non-State Actors: A Study of Complementary Governance. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*. 4(1), Art.2, p. 2

format”. In this sense, the violence against civilians is a central form of civil war violence; and institutions are formed to regulate it. Hence, the denunciations and executions are decided in the context of these institutions. Civil war violence does not presuppose the processes of “dehumanization of the other”. That is why “a theory of civil war violence must generate hypotheses that are able to elaborate the variation of violence across actors”.¹⁸ Kalyvas analyzes the dynamics of civil wars and distinguishes between the broad concept of civil war and the phenomenon of civil war violence. According to him, a civil war violence cannot be read adequately solely by irrational factors, such as strong emotions, illogical behavior and pre-existing ideological cleavages. On the contrary, civil war violence against civilians has its own rationale and logic.¹⁹

The focus given on the NSA in general shifted towards the VNSA especially after the September 11 attacks, and the studies on VNSA multiplied exponentially. However, though there are overlapping areas, definitions of the VNSA also vary. Krause and Milliken, for example, claim that although the definitions about the VNSA are very broad and different from each other, in general “the traditional definitions revolve around the idea that an armed group is ‘an armed, non-state actor in contemporary wars...[with] a minimal degree of cohesiveness as an organization (to be distinguished as an entity with a name and to have some kind of leadership) and a certain duration of its violent campaign’.”²⁰ Although the definition of the VNSA is highly contested, there are two main characteristics of the VNSA that most of the scholars agree on: VNSAs have political aims and use violent means to reach their political ends.²¹ Therefore, it would be fair to define the VNSA in general as entities with a clear ideology and freedom of action which use (unpredictable) violent tactics or means to achieve their political aims, to reach a range of constituency and to have control over a specific territory or people.

¹⁸ Kalyvas, S., *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Krause K., & Milliken J., Introduction: The Challenge of Non-State Armed Groups. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2009, p. 202

²¹ See Harmon, C., Five strategies of terrorism. *Small Wars and Insurgencies* , 2001, pp. 39-66. M. Mishali-Ram, Powerful Actors Make a Difference: Theorizing Power Attributes of Nonstate Actors. *International Journal of Peace Studies* , 55-82. Kydd, A., & Walter, B. (2006). The Strategies of Terrorism. *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Summer 2006), pp. 49–80

Krause and Milliken lists five distinct groups under the VNSA: Insurgent groups; Militant groups; Urban gangs and warlords; private militias, police forces and security companies; and transnational groups. A similar distinction is also given by Aydinli, but he lists six groups instead of five: Insurgents; militant groups; warlords/ urban gangs; private militias/military companies; terrorists; criminal organizations.²² Despite such a classification Aydinli claims also that the best way to understand the VNSA is by analyzing three main principles: autonomy, representation and influence. Williams, similarly distinguishes between different types of VNSA and also lists six types: warlords, militias, paramilitary forces, insurgencies, terrorist organizations, and criminal organizations/youth gangs.²³ Warlords, currently exemplified by those in Afghanistan, are charismatic individuals with some military background, exercising territorial control, co-existing with the state but ensuring that the state control does not reach to their areas. Militias are similar to warlords but charismatic leadership does not exist. They are an irregular armed force operating within the territory of a weak and/or failing state.²⁴ Paramilitary forces are quite similar to militias; one distinguishing quality would be that paramilitary forces are, initially at least, an extension of government forces.²⁵ Their existence is often encouraged by the state. Criminal Organizations are mostly rational actors who are trying to derive as much profit as possible through their activities. They vary in power, structure, scope of activity, territorial expansion etc.

An insurgency is an “organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.” According to another definition, it is “an organized, armed political struggle whose goal may be the seizure of power through revolutionary takeover and replacement of the existing government.”²⁶ Insurgents, according to Williams, typically operate within a defined territory and seek to deprive the existing government of legitimacy while establishing themselves as a viable

²²Aydinli E.,. Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics: a framework for analysis. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* , 2013, p. 4.

²³Williams P., *Violent Non-State Actors and national and International Security*, International Relations and Security Network, 2008. p. 9

²⁴ Williams, *Violent Non-State Actors*, p.10

²⁵ Williams, *Violent Non-State Actors*, p.11

²⁶ Williams, *Violent Non-State Actors*, p.12

and legitimate alternative.”²⁷ They simply show hostility towards the existing state and fight to replace it with a new state established on the ideology, principles and norms they espouse. Although insurgents often resort to terrorist activities to undermine the existing state structures, they also try to establish alternative forms of governance in areas they control. They also vary in structure: some are decentralized while others are organized around core leadership with a degree of hierarchy.²⁸ And finally, terrorist organizations use indiscriminate violence against civilians. This is central to their strategy, and their defining characteristic. Although terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda rose to prominence with their transnational networks of sympathizers and global operational capability, Williams argues that they are the weakest of all other types of VNSA in terms of their challenge to state integrity and legitimacy. Most terrorist organizations do not have the capacity to create a full-fledged insurgency; rather, they seek to destabilize the state and undermine its authority. In the sense that both insurgents and terrorist organizations resort to terrorist activities, the line between the two types of VNSA is very thin.

Some of the literature looks at the reasons leading to the empowerment of the VNSA. Gartenstein-Ross, for example, claims that the main reason for the VNSA’s empowerment is the fragility of the nation-state system driven by three main elements: austerity, resource scarcity and technological advances²⁹ Other studies look at the individual or group level analyses and rely heavily on the psychological or social factors that make individuals to join the VNSA. Scholars such as Altran (2003) and Austin (2004) claim that the main reason is not deprivation; rather it is mostly belief or ideological based. On the other hand Abrahms (2008) in his article “What Terrorists Really Want” argues that individuals do not join an organization in order to achieve its political agenda but “to develop strong affective ties with other terrorist members.”³⁰

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid, p. 13.

²⁹ Gartenstein-Ross D., *Terrorism and the Coming Decade*. 2011. Retrieved March 17, 2015, from Global Brief: <http://globalbrief.ca/blog/2011/10/19/terrorism-and-the-coming-decade-of-fragility/>

³⁰ Abrahms, M. (2008). What terrorists really want: Terrorist motives and counterterrorism strategy. *International Security* , 78-105.

There are also a number of group level analyses that look at the reasons that prepare the ground for the failure or success of the VNSA actions. Ginkel and Smith, for example, analyze the relation between the VNSA and the state to see what kind of an impact this relation would have on the success rate of the violent attacks. There are two important points that highlight the complex relationship between the state and the VNSA. Firstly, in some cases, it is the state itself that finances and facilitates terrorist groups to achieve a certain end against its rivals. In other words, it is sometimes the states that create the VNSA. For example, During the Cold War years, as Adams (1986) argued, both superpowers used the terrorism card in order to achieve their goals. Blackburn (2002) in his analysis of the War on Terror argues that terrorist groups such as the Taliban were state-supported, and that USA or Saudi Arabia initially supported these terrorist groups for their own interests. The second point brings another perspective which became more common after the Cold War; that is terrorist groups take advantage of weak states. Benjamin & Simon (2002) claim that failed states provide the best conditions for the terrorists. Similarly, Bourne (2011) argues that “illicit flows are understood as arising from networks that are discursively located in spaces where states are absent or weak.”

As a matter of fact, the VNSA’s relationship with the state works in two simultaneous directions: the weak/failed states prepare the ground for and nurture the VNSA³¹, while the VNSA weakens the state structures. A state becomes weak when it loses certain qualities which are accepted as critical components of the modern Westphalian state. These qualities include legitimacy, capacity, primacy of the collective interest over individual interest, and inclusiveness rather than exclusivity.³²The legitimacy basically denotes to the people’s consent about the state. The failure in commanding legitimacy often makes the state try to gain legitimacy through force and coercion, which in turn shifts people’s loyalty from state to other entities, including the VNSA. The VNSA are the usual beneficiaries of illegitimate states, and use legitimacy as their main driving force against the states from which they try to get compromises or which they try to replace. The

³¹ See Schneckener, U., *Fragile Statehood, Armed Non-State Actors and Security Governance* In: Bryden, A and Caparini, M eds. *Private Actors and Security Governance* (LIT Verlag Münster, 2006) pp. 23–40

³² Williams, *Violent Non-State Actors*, p. 5.

primacy of the collective interest over individual interest is what makes a pluralistic society. The prioritization of public good over private gains of certain groups or individuals keeps the society aligned with the state, while the reverse scenario again creates fertile ground for the VNSA to mobilize people against the state. Strong and effective states “have a significant extractive capacity but match this with the provision of collective goods ranging from the maintenance of security and order to health care and welfare.”³³ Failure in providing people with the collective good in accordance with the capacity makes states weak. Inclusiveness requires creation of equal opportunities for all groups within a state in order to pursue political influence or receive their share in resources and services. Needless to say, the states where exclusivity is in effect lack in legitimacy are inherently weak.

As a part of the vast literature on terrorism, some studies analyze in depth the strategies used by the VNSA, while others look deep into the counter-terrorism strategies and how to fight the VNSA in the most effective way. Kydd and Walter, for example, write that terrorist groups have five main goals: Regime change; territorial change; policy change; social control, status quo maintenance. Based on these goals terrorist groups pursue five main strategies: attrition, spoiling, intimidation, outbidding, and provocation.³⁴ On the other hand, Harmon (2010) alleges another five leading strategies: creation of societal dislocation or chaos; discrediting or destroying a particular government; rendering economic and property damage; bleeding state security forces and initiating other military damage; spreading fear for international effect.³⁵

A final strand of the policy oriented literature focuses on assessing counter-terrorism efforts. Kydd and Walter (2006) bring a detailed analysis for each of the above mentioned strategies and the best response that a state can give for them. Blackburn (2002) considers a more liberal strategy to fight terrorism. He claims that there is a need for a genuine campaign against terrorism which would consist of an international and fair partnership and the creation of a supranational agency which should not be under the lead of the United States. However, lately a new strategy has been discussed by many scholars,

³³Ibid.

³⁴Kydd & Walter, 2006, p. 59

³⁵Harmon, 2001, p. 39

and there have been a lot of debates about its efficiency. As Gartenstein-Ross mentions in his article, social resilience would be a good and effective way to evade the damage which may be caused by the VNSA. However, some scholars such as Heath-Kelly and Cavelty et al. claim that resilience fails in subjectivity and temporality³⁶ and go further calling resilience a chimera³⁷ which is used as a political discourse but it is not efficient to fight the damages caused by the VNSA.

2.2. IR Theories and the Violent Non-State Actors

According to the dominant traditional realist paradigm, the main actor and entity in the international system is the state; and the non-state actors do not have a considerable impact on interstate relations, because they believe that non-state actors do not have enough power to affect international conflicts.³⁸ The realists' state-centric understanding of the international system, prevalent since World War II, has built up their argument against the assumptions of idealists and liberals who believe that public opinion matters in shaping foreign policy. The seminal scholar Hans Morgenthau and other realists considered the state as the main unit of analysis, arguing that a non-state actor could not presume the role of balancing another state. They further argued that states are rational actors which are seeking first and foremost to increase their power, especially military, both as a means and an end.³⁹ In other words, every policy of a state aims to "maintain, increase and apply power, and since only states have the resources to enable them to maximize their power, they are the most significant actors in the system".⁴⁰ For the realists, three elements are *sine qua non* for an entity to be considered as a state. The entity must be a sovereign

³⁶ Cavelty M. D., Kaufmann M., & Kristensen K.S., Resilience and (In)security: Practices, Subjects, Temporalities. *Security Dialogue*. 2015, p. 6.

³⁷ Heath-Kelly C., Securing Through the Failure to Secure? The Ambiguity of Resilience at the Bombsite. *Security Dialogue*. 2015, p. 71.

³⁸ Ferguson Y.H., Mansbach R.W., "Global Politics at the Turn of the Millennium: Changing Bases of "Us" and "Them." *International Studies Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 77-107

³⁹ Valensi C., Non-State Actors: A Theoretical Limitation in a Changing Middle East. *Military and Strategic Affairs*, Volume 7, No. 1, March 2015. p. 62

⁴⁰ Morgenthau H., *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p.21

body, it must be recognized as a state by other states and must have control over a territory with a population. These are the basics of a state, and according to the realists, non-state actors lack these qualities; therefore, they lack in importance and cannot shape international affairs.

However, starting from the 1970's and 80's, discussions revolving around non-state actors as influencers of international affairs increased as violent non-state actors (VNSA) such as the National Liberation Front in Algeria, ETA in Spain, the Baeder Meinhof gang in Germany, The Irish Republican Army in Ireland and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka gained prominence and increased their activities.⁴¹ As the VNSA gained a foothold in discussions in international affairs, it became clear that the classical realists' analysis was not adequate to explain the complex web of relations in the international system by solely focusing on the state as the main unit of analysis. This does not mean that the basic assumptions of the realists have no relevance. On the contrary, the inter-state tensions in the 1970's and 1980's such as Iran-Iraq War and the Yom Kippur War etc. demonstrated that the states were still key units of analysis in international affairs. However, changing realities on the ground, emerging new actors as influencers of foreign policy as well as globalization, technological revolution and advancements in transportation, forced international relations theorists to take the states together with non-state actors into account to paint a more representative picture of the power relations in the international system. Under this new atmosphere, neo-realism emerged, and one of its key proponents, Kenneth Waltz, argued that "while the nature of power had changed, its use had not"⁴², admitting that the power was divided among different actors and the states do not have the monopoly over it.

The non-realist paradigms especially the liberal theory, however, take non-state actors into consideration, coming short of duly analyzing violent non-state actors (VNSA), focusing more on economic and social interests of the NSA. They believe that the state is not a homogenous entity and has conflicting and competing sectors within itself. This creates an occasional imbalance between seeking power and acting rationally which

⁴¹ Valensi, p. 63

⁴² Waltz K., *Theory of International Politics* (Michigan: Addison-Wesley, 1979) p. 93

ultimately contributes to the anarchic characteristic of the international system. There, according to the liberalist approach, international institutions could play a mediating role in curing the anarchy in the international system. Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane were among liberals who questioned the adequacy of the realist paradigm in analyzing the current international system and criticized the realists for the neglect in considering non-state actors as power brokers in foreign affairs. They worked on a series of interactions and concluded that the movement of tangible or intangible items across state boundaries when at least one actor is not an agent of government or an intergovernmental organization".⁴³ Later, as Williams and Booth argued in "*Kant: Theorist beyond Limits*", liberal thinkers mostly focus on the positive aspect of the non-state actors in preventing conflicts in the international system. However, history and world politics have demonstrated that the non-state actors' impact in world politics has not always been positive. The VNSA have repeatedly threatened the Westphalian system, which relied on "independent states refraining from the interference in each other's domestic affairs and checking each other's ambitions through a general equilibrium of power".⁴⁴ Kissinger believes that this system and its main principles have been challenged "by ideologies rejecting its constraints as illegitimate and by terrorist militias that, in several countries, are stronger than the armed forces of the government".⁴⁵ The September 11 terrorist attack showed clearly to the world that a dire challenge was in place targeting directly the roots of the Westphalian system; and non-state actors are not threatening only one state but the whole international system⁴⁶. Due to the September 11 attacks and the "war on terror" as well as George W. Bush's policies, the focus of study shifted from the state towards non-state actors and from interstate conflicts towards civil and ethnic wars and terrorism. Nevertheless, some scholars still claim that the balance between state and NSA did not change. What really happened was the latter "altered the security environment in which states operate" and "the distinction between internal and external security threats is increasingly blurred".⁴⁷

⁴³Keohane R.O. and Nye J.S., *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1972) p. 332.

⁴⁴Kissinger H., *World Order*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2014) p.4

⁴⁵ Kissinger, p. 7.

⁴⁶ See Buzan & Hansen, 2009; Kydd & Walter, 2006; Noortmann, 2002

⁴⁷Adamson, 2005, pp. 31-32

The September 11 attack and the consequent “War on Terror” had dramatic influence over how the non-state actors’ roles are to be understood within the context of international relations. As Al-Qaeda struck the heart of the United States’ both financial and military complexes, what realist and liberal theories previously wrote about the NSA offered little help in understanding the newly emerging discussions around the NSA. Constructivist approach, on the other hand, offered alternative explanations to the NSA, especially the rising threat of global terrorism, and according to some scholars such as Lynch, “constructivism seemed best placed in evaluating terrorism”.⁴⁸The September 11 attacks highlighted the importance of understanding culture, identity, religion, and ideas through the lenses of international relations theory; and constructivism stepped right in there. The core constructivist scholar, Alexander Wendt, gave special focus on the “impact of ideas and identities, how they are created, how they evolve and shape the way states respond to a situation”⁴⁹, and constructivists in general argued that the interest and identities of the actors operating in the international system are shaped by their concept of the world, which is socially structured.⁵⁰ According to Wendt, there are three main terms that shapes the behaviors of actors in international system: identities, which determine the actors’ identity; norms, defined as shared expectations concerning the proper behavior for the actor’s identity; and interests, referring to what the actors want to achieve.⁵¹Constructivists see terrorism as a social construction, and argue that terrorism cannot exist without the ideas of people involved in it. This brings the analysis of ideologies, identities, interests and norms to the fore to grasp the behavior of distinct categories of the NSA, including terrorist organizations.

The dominant theories of international relations, one could argue, do not fully explain the rise and expansion of ISIS, although they offer insights on various parts of the phenomenon. Realism, as mentioned above, gives overemphasis on the state, and despite later neorealist attempts, still does not pay due attention on the NSA such as ISIS in

⁴⁸ Lynch M., Transnational dialogue in an age of terror. *Global Society*. 2010. 19(1), p5-28.

⁴⁹ Adler E., “Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997): 319-63.

⁵⁰ Valensi, 65

⁵¹ Wendt A., “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391-425.

explaining the balance of power in the international system. The realist theory may shed a light on the war against ISIS by self-interested countries, some propelled by survival instincts and others motivated by preemption. However, the same war against ISIS by a coalition of a dozen states needs further elaboration by the realists. Ironically the war against ISIS itself makes the group, which is targeted simultaneously by a dozen states, an influential actor in the international system. Realism also appears irrelevant when it comes to ISIS' messianic motivations, and its efforts for self-redemption using violence as a method. The liberal theory, on the other hand, while acknowledging the importance of the NSA, gives overemphasis to the economic aspects, international institutions and democracy which again fall short in explaining the rise of the ISIS phenomenon. As Lynch argued, constructivism offers better insight into ISIS, and any other ideologically motivated group, by emphasizing the impact of ideas and identities. As will be discussed in later chapters, ideology is a key aspect of the ISIS enterprise and must be taken into consideration to understand its ontology, make sense of its strategies and predict its future steps. It is the ideology which shapes the way ISIS responds to the developments around it and their concept of the world has direct repercussions on their relations with other actors, their mentality in fighting and the way they rule.

2.3. ISIS as a Violent Non-State Actor

While there is not a common definition for the VNSA, as mentioned above, there are still several commonalities on which most scholars agree. Even when those commonalities are taken into consideration, the question of to what extent ISIS fits in the definition of the VNSA is yet to be answered. As will be examined in detail in the following chapters, although there are aspects of ISIS which do not fully overlap with the definitions of the VNSA, one could still argue that the qualities of ISIS make the group more of a VNSA than a state; regardless of how the group members and sympathizers define themselves. What makes the case of ISIS more complex and confusing within the context of the VNSA are basically twofold. First, ISIS- unlike most VNSAs such as terror

groups and insurgents-is aiming to conquer territory transnationally to establish a state. As a matter of fact, the territory that they have “conquered” so far is much bigger than many nation-states both within and outside of the Middle East. Second, ISIS manages a civil government with a considerable level of bureaucracy, oversees a relatively gigantic economy, imposes a school curriculum, controls border posts and maintains an army and intelligence services. Yet, it –like the VNSA- have a clear ideology that is a mixture of takfirism and messianism, use violent tactics to its extremes including beheadings, burning alive, mass murder, slavery etc. Furthermore, it does not meet the criteria set by the realists to be categorized as a state. Although ISIS has control over a considerable amount of territory and a substantial population, its sovereignty is quite arguable because although it has a firm grip on the territory which it controls it has not been recognized as a state by other states. Therefore, it would be appropriate to consider ISIS as a VNSA that is on the border of holding qualities of a state in the Westphalian sense.

In Williams’ definition of the terms, ISIS shares many similarities with the insurgencies and terrorist groups. As mentioned before, the line between the two types of VNSA is very thin, and ISIS is a striking example of this. ISIS navigates at the border between an insurgency and a terrorist organization; it exhibits almost all the characteristics of a terrorist organization, however, differs slightly from the insurgency. For example, the argument that ISIS is after the seizure and replacement of the current governments in Syria and Iraq would be too simplistic, and does not fit with either ISIS’ ideas about itself as a preordained caliphate nor the very concept of the state. The state in ISIS’ mind is not a Westphalian state. It transcends borders of nation-states, and its power projection reaches anywhere Muslims live. Insurgencies operate mostly within set boundaries which simply do not exist for ISIS. Additionally, depriving the central government in Iraq of legitimacy was one of ISIS’s targets; and it has succeeded in shaking this authority especially after capturing Mosul and advancing towards Baghdad. In Syria, however, ISIS have mostly targeted the local insurgents, i.e. the Syrian armed opposition, and deprived them of land. Except for strategically key areas, ISIS has prioritized its fight against the opposition over the one against the Assad regime.

ISIS' expansion in Syria and Iraq was no coincidence, as both countries have almost all the preconditions for the emergence and nurturing of the VNSA. To begin with, both states lacked legitimacy because of their brutal use of power against dissidents, and the social contract between the state and society was abrogated. In Syria, the Assad regime used brutal force against peaceful protesters, killed a big score of them and pushed others to live as refugees, both internally and outside the country. The insurgency started long before the arrival of ISIS in Syria, which became a hotbed for the VNSA. In Iraq, the authoritarianism and sectarian policies of the then Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki created uproar among the Sunni populations; and shifted the loyalty of certain groups in the Iraqi society from the state towards the NSA, including ISIS. Both countries had problems with handling their capacity and failed to deliver collective provision which ultimately undermined their legitimacy. This is partly related with the inequalities caused by an imbalance between the collective and individual interest in favor of individuals. In Syria, the Assad family and a close circle of relatives and protégés control key positions in the economy and politics: while in Iraq, the whole government structure was designed according to confessionalism, opening venues for Al-Maliki's favoritism and nepotism. In other words, both countries have been ruled by policies of social, economic and political exclusivity which in turn made the rise of the VNSA such as ISIS inevitable.

In short, ISIS is arguably at the most advance level of the VNSA thanks to the vast amount of territory it controls, the fact that it is the richest VNSA in the world and its sophisticated governance in Syria and Iraq. As for the types of VNSA, ISIS is a mixture of an insurgency and a terrorist organization. In other words, it is more than a terrorist organization especially because of its territorial possessions. This of course does not stop ISIS from using tactics of terrorism and acts of brute violence; the advertisement of violence and spread of fear and insecurity among opponents have been the group's principle strategy. ISIS is yet another example of the relation between weak/fragile states and the emergence and rise of the VNSA. It has again proven that while the VNSA rise in weak states, the VNSA also weaken the states they operate in further. Iraq and Syria are two striking cases proving this argument. The relation between weak/fragile states and the rise of the VNSA as in the case of ISIS once again demonstrates that weak/fragile states are

not only bad for their citizens; but also for the international community in general. The VNSA such as ISIS benefits from weakness of states and fill the vacuum with their alternative acts and ideologies. ISIS benefited highly from the post-Arab Spring chaos, death of Osama bin Laden, the Egyptian Coup, the Syrian conflict as well as Al-Maliki's sectarian policies. When it filled the power vacuum, ISIS first posed a domestic concern but then transformed into a regional threat and finally became a global issue. Therefore, the study on ISIS would not only further our understanding of the boundaries of the VNSA, but also shed light on the local aspects of global issues.



3. The History of ISIS: Its Web of Alliances and Leader

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.”

Sun Tzu

ISIS’ history offers valuable insight on the group’s current terror strategy, worldview, militant profile as well its complex web of relations with regional and global actors. The group which would transform into ISIS has its organizational and ideological roots in the earlier structures established by the infamous jihadi ideologue and practitioner Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in the late 1990’s. Hence, a better understanding of the current manifestation of ISIS is aided by giving special emphasis to Al-Zarqawi’s ideology and activities starting from his initial involvement with the jihadi circles. Al-Zarqawi is also a key figure to help understand future divisions between Al-Qaeda and ISIS. One of the main reasons for the division and ensuing conflict between the Al-Qaeda Core and ISIS was the ideological differences between Al-Zarqawi’s approach to jihad and that of Osama bin Laden’s and Ayman Al-Zawahiri’s. This was not solely an ideological rift, it also had practical implications in terms of military strategy. Apparently, the two approaches differed greatly in shaping their strategy, although this difference did not cause actual divisions within the Al-Qaeda enterprise for a long time. The school of Bin Laden in the Al-Qaeda Core believed that their strategy should prioritize Western targets (far enemy) in order to first drive the infidels out of Muslim lands and second to punish them in their home for their wrongdoings in the Muslim lands. The school of Al-Zarqawi, however, believed that the emphasis should be given to the near enemy; that is the enemies within, i.e. Shiites and apostates. This would exacerbate the intercommunal tensions among Muslims in the Middle East which, as will be explained later, is part of ISIS’ and its predecessors’ apocalyptic world view.

An extensive review of ISIS’ history of organizational development indicates that ISIS is mostly an Iraqi phenomenon. Although its ideological forefather, Al-Zarqawi, is a Jordanian by citizenship and its operational history dates back to Afghanistan, the group

found its real identity in Iraq and developed as the strongest VNSA in the world thanks to its gains and alliances in Iraq. One could even argue that despite differing strategies Al-Qaeda's weak existence in Iraq paved the way for the school of Al-Zarqawi's prominence and consequent domination of ISIS in global jihadi circles. It is therefore no coincidence that the upper echelons of ISIS are dominated by Iraqis, including its leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and his deputies. In the same manner, the group's alliance with Saddam era officers played a key role in creating a sophisticated VNSA which has claims for statehood, and as a matter of fact exceeding the boundaries of the VNSA. This alliance also helped ISIS to excel on the battlefield especially against inexperienced rebels, who took arms only after the beginning of the uprising in Syria. The domination of the Iraqis and alliances with local tribes and Saddam era officers, coupled with Al-Maliki's sectarian and authoritarian rule, provided the group with a unique opportunity to exploit anger towards the central government and gain some legitimacy and societal backing in Iraq.

This chapter will seek the ideological and operational roots of ISIS through the lives of two key Salafi-jihadi figures, Abdullah Azzam and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. There is surely an older history starting from the Afghan War in the 1980's; however, the institutionalization of the predecessors of ISIS and the crystallization of ISIS ideology coincide with the years of the American invasion in Iraq. During these years, ISIS under different names morphed into an Iraqi-dominated group while still receiving foreign fighters thanks to the Assad regime's facilitation, and formed alliances with some tribes and Saddam era officers. These alliances and the Iraqi domination of the group would prove to be critical in shaping ISIS' institutional identity and conduct. This chapter will also give a first-hand account of ISIS' leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. His life story starting from his ideologically formative years in the Islamic University in Baghdad until his ascension to the leadership position in ISIS gives unique insights into both the organizational and ideological structure of the group. His rapid promotion within the ranks of the key jihadi movement is a striking example of upward mobility as it took him only 5 years after his release from the notorious Camp Bucca as an insignificant detainee to become the leader of the jihadi enterprise in Iraq.

3.1. Abdullah Azzam and the Historical Roots of Salafi-Jihadi Ideology

The Salafi-jihadi ideology is obviously not a new phenomenon. It has been manifesting itself in anti-colonial struggles and conflict zones at varying levels and forms for decades. However, several incidents and personalities played key transformative roles in shaping today's Salafi-jihadi ideology; therefore, both the ideological and tactical roots of the Salafi-jihadi groups can be traced back to these incidents and personalities. One must point out one person and one incident here as the major turning point for the contemporary Salafi-jihadi movements: Abdullah Azzam and the Soviet-Afghan War. Azzam played a key role in transforming Salafi-jihadi ideology by actively preaching and traveling all around the world to recruit Muslims for the jihad in Afghanistan. The War itself gave the necessary grounds for Azzam to implement his interpretation of jihad which would have an unrivaled impact on future Salafi-jihadi groups. Most notably, Islamic revivalism dating back to the early 20th century, anti-colonial movements and ideologies, Israeli occupation of the historical Palestinian territory and consequent defeats of the Arab armies, crises of the 1970's as well as the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 played a huge role in both raising the necessity to resist increasing domination of the West in Muslim lands and in shaping the methods by which Muslims should resist against the Western power.⁵² Salafi-jihadi ideology is but one method that was incepted to cope with the decades long losses of the Muslims in both territory and prestige.

The Soviet-Afghan War, however, turned into a breeding ground for Salafi-jihadis and played a key role in the widespread proliferation of Salafi-jihadi ideology and its transformation to a transnational movement.⁵³ Abdullah Azzam was born in 1941 in Jenin in Palestine, and gained his elementary and secondary education there before attending the Khaduriyya Agricultural College in Tulkarem, Palestine. After his graduation, he first pursued a teaching career and later enrolled himself into the Sharia Faculty in Damascus

⁵² See Gerges F. *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (New York: Harcourt Trade, 2006) and Kepel, Gilles. *The Roots of Radical Islam* (London: Saqi, 2005)

⁵³ Shay S. *The Endless Jihad: The Mujahidin, the Taliban and Bin Laden* (Herzliya: The International Policy Institute of Counter Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center, 2002) p.40

University, familiarizing himself with the works and even making acquaintances of the leaders of Islamic movements in the Levant such as Said Ramadan Al-Buti, Said Hawwa, Muhammad Adib Al-Salih, Molla Ramadan etc.⁵⁴ After the 1967 War with Israel, as a result of which Azzam's birthplace fell under Israeli occupation, he moved to Jordan and worked in Saudi Arabia for a short period. This period was formative for Azzam's Salafi-jihadi ideas, and he joined like-minded Islamic resistance groups at the Al-Shuyukh base, becoming the commander of the Bayt Al-Maqdis branch of the Al-Shuyukh.⁵⁵

After clashes between Jordanian security forces and the Palestinian resistance took place, Palestinian resistance activities were consequently banned in Jordan. Coupled with his disillusionment of the secular and provincial nature of the Palestinian resistance movements, Azzam first taught in Amman and then moved to Cairo to pursue a PhD degree in Islamic jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University. Completing his PhD, Azzam returned to Jordan where he taught at the Shariah Faculty of Jordan University, but later moved to Saudi Arabia to teach at King Abdulaziz University. In Saudi Arabia, Azzam met the brother-in-law of Sayyid Qutb, Kemal Al-Sananiri, whose role in persuading Azzam proved to be a significant turning point in mobilizing Muslims for jihad in Afghanistan.⁵⁶ He moved to Pakistan to work as a lecturer in the International Islamic University in Islamabad, where he set his mind to take the jihad in Afghanistan as his prime job and responsibility. He later moved to the border town of Peshawar to have direct contact with the fighters where he would later establish *Maktab Al-Khidmat li Al-Mujahdeen* (Office of Services for the Mujahedeen) to support the jihad in Afghanistan by taking care of the needs of the mujahedeen, Afghani and foreign recruits.

During these years, Azzam accelerated his efforts first to define his understanding of jihad and then to disseminate it to a larger audience for the benefit of the jihad in Afghanistan. He used media extensively to spread his ideas and recruit Muslims to support the jihad either financially or in person by actively fighting in Afghanistan. He wrote books and booklets such as *Al-Difa an Aradi Al-Muslimin* (Defense of the Muslim Lands) and

⁵⁴ Hassan M.H., *The Father of Jihad: Abdullah Azzam's Jihad and Implications to National Security* (London: Imperial College Press, 2014), p. 18.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Al-Jihad Magazine, 74, Al-Sananiri

Ilhaq bi al-Qafilah (Join the Convoy) to lure Muslims to Afghanistan, and also published *Al-Jihad* magazine and *Lahib al-Muaraqa* newsletter to discuss jihad related issues as well as to spread news about the ongoing battles, victories and needs of the mujahedeen.⁵⁷ Earlier forms of information revolution by the Salafi-jihadi circles were made possible by Azzam, and he used all media organs available to reach a wider audience in the Muslim world. His sermons and speeches, for example, were recorded in cassettes and distributed all over the world to muster support and recruit new fighters.

Although Azzam is widely considered as the most influential Salafi-jihadi ideologue of our times, his contribution is more one of establishing the groundwork for Islamic resistance. His understanding of jihad and the methodology that he advocated, however, differed from the future leaders of the Salafi-jihadi movement. For example, he was a significant person in the recruitment of Bin Laden to the service of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, and Bin Laden contributed greatly to the *Maktab Al-Hidmat li Al-Mujahedeen*. However, the two parted their ways some time later mostly because of their diverging opinions about how the jihad must be conducted, though they maintained cordial relations. Azzam prioritized Afghanistan over other conflict zones in the Muslim world, and advocated that the jihad should be conducted against the near enemy; that is the corrupt, anti-Islamic regimes of the Muslim countries. In the case of Afghanistan, this was the communist regime supported by Soviet Russia. One should note here that the very term of “near enemy” would have new meanings in the future through the twists given by Salafi-jihadi leaders, such as Al-Zarqawi. Azzam believed in what one may call defensive jihad that primarily aims to defend Muslim lands from occupation of Western powers and profanation of corrupt local rulers. Azzam respected the sociological fabric of the country he was operating in and helping to liberate itself to the extent that he sought for the synchronization of local forces with the foreign fighters. He was against the formation of independent groups by foreign fighters, and thought that this was not only dividing ranks of the mujahedeen but also feeding social tensions between Arab and Afghan

⁵⁷ See McGregor, A. Jihad and the Rifle Alone: Abdullah Azzam and the Islamist Revolution. *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, 23 (2).

fighters.⁵⁸Significantly Azzam was strongly against the “indiscriminate killings of innocent lives”⁵⁹ and quite sensitive about the *takfir* (pronouncing a Muslim infidel) process and killing of fellow Muslims.⁶⁰As will be discussed later, license to kill Muslims is strongly related with the *takfir*, and Azzam made it very clear that killing a Muslim is a grave sin and can send the killer to hell permanently. Azzam devoted a whole booklet entitled “*Jarima Qatl Al-Nafs Al-Muslimah*”(The Crime of Taking a Muslim Life)in which he emphasized that all Muslim lives are as sacred as the holy city of Mecca.⁶¹ Of course, there were exceptions to this rule for those who collaborate and fight with infidels against their fellow Muslims.

Despite disagreements, Osama Bin Laden, on the other hand, respected Azzam and carried Azzam’s ideas to the next level with his focus on the “far enemy” especially after the defeat of the Soviet Russia in Afghanistan. The far enemy symbolizes those Western powers who are invading Muslim lands directly or corrupting them through their proxies which they support militarily, politically and financially. This line of thought advocated that if the far enemy can be defeated the near enemy would automatically fail, or at least cannot sustain itself for a long time.⁶²This explains why in later periods Bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda attacked Western targets in Port of Aden, Nairobi and Riyadh. Bin Laden divided his attention and support to various conflict zones, including Egypt, established his own support network for foreign fighters and believed in the independence of the foreign fighters, which eventually set the groundwork for his transnational organization, Al-Qaeda. Bin Laden’s focus on the non-Muslim enemy is worth noting here too, as we will see in the following chapters; Bin Laden would represent a line of thought within the Salafi-jihadi circles focusing on the far enemy, which would create further divisions in the Al-Qaeda enterprise.

⁵⁸ Hassan M.H., *The Father of Jihad*. p. 24

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Azzam A., *إتحاف العباد في فضائل الجهاد*. pp. 9-11 http://eldorar.net/sites/default/files/thf_lbd_bfdyl_ljhd_-_lshykh_bd_llh_zm.pdf

⁶¹ See Azzam A., *جريمة قتل النفس المسلمة*, <http://www.daawa-info.net/books1.php?parts=125&au=>

⁶² Gerges F. *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global?*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p.

3.2. The Chief Ideologue of ISIS: Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi

As far as ISIS' history is concerned, the most important figure is inarguably Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, the most seminal incident is the invasion of Iraq by the US forces and the ensuing war. The future history of ISIS, its tactics and worldview is highly influenced by Al-Zarqawi, who in Iraq found an invaluable opportunity to implement his apocalyptic ideas through the jihad of his understanding. His ideology and strategy, based on his reading of the world matters and *raison d'etre* of Salafi-jihadi movements, shaped ISIS' terror strategy; therefore, it is quite difficult to get a full sense of ISIS without carefully looking at Al-Zarqawi's life story, his ideational development and strategy. One should note here that, as will be explained later, Al-Zarqawi represents a distinct branch within the Salafi-jihadi movements with his ultra-violent tendencies and highly apocalyptic reading of religious texts. There was a divergence of opinions between Azzam and Bin Laden, but they maintained cordial relations, and this divergence did not cause seismic waves among Salafi-jihadi circles. However, the difference between Al-Zarqawi and other Salafi-jihadi ideologues were so deep that Al-Zarqawi's successors would break away from the core group and turn ideological divisions into an armed conflict as in the case of the ISIS-Jabhat Al-Nusra fight.

Al-Zarqawi was born in 1966 in Zarqa, as his family name suggests, in Jordan. His family is from the Bani Hassan Tribe with Bedouin roots. Al-Zarqawi's childhood passed in "a miserable, working-class neighborhood where traditional and tribal values mixed badly with the Western consumerism and rapid modernization of the late 1960s."⁶³ A number of scholars argue that Al-Zarqawi's tribal roots and the environment that he was brought up in shaped his world view and decision-making process.⁶⁴ Regardless of his upbringing, his father's death in 1984 influenced his teenage years quite badly as he dropped out of school and committed petty crimes eventually ending up in prison. The charges were drug possession and sexual assault, as will be discussed in the next chapter, these are very common crimes among a certain group of ISIS recruits especially coming

⁶³Napoleoni L. Profile of a Killer in *Foreign Policy*. October 20, 2009.

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/20/profile-of-a-killer/>

⁶⁴ Gerges F., *A History of ISIS* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) p.52

from Western countries seeking redemption. A few years after his release from the prison, Al-Zarqawi, previously known for his semi-literacy and profanity, moved to Afghanistan to join the mujahedeen in 1989. He stayed in Afghanistan for four years after the defeat of Soviet Russia until 1993 and during that time established his initial contacts with the Salafi-jihadi circles. He returned to Jordan in 1993 where he continued his involvement in Salafi-jihadi movements. His acquaintance with Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, a well-known Salafi-jihadi cleric, goes back to those years when the two established *Al-Tawhid*, an armed group which would be later called *Bayat Al-Imam*. The two first met, according to some accounts, back in the early 1990's in Afghanistan; however, this was a brief introduction, and their pupil-mentor relationship began in Jordan. Abdullah Azzam previously influenced Al-Zarqawi's Salafi-jihadi upbringing, but in Al-Maqdisi Al-Zarqawi found a new and more significant mentor. They were arrested, and sentenced to fifteen years in prison and stayed in several prisons, including the Al-Suwaqa prison which furthered Al-Zarqawi's radicalization due to the inhumane treatment by prison officers. The prison years were a turning point in Al-Zarqawi's life, as in the case of many other key figures of the Salafi-jihadi movements, the prison created the grounds for indoctrination, radicalization as well as planning. Al-Suwaqa prison at the time had around 6,000 inmates, and the sixth ward where Al-Zarqawi was also staying was populated by political prisoners from various Islamic groups. The prison years therefore gave Al-Zarqawi the opportunity, as an uneducated person, to listen to and learn from different Islamist personalities.⁶⁵ Fouad Hussein, a former inmate in Al-Suwaqa and a journalist, who conducted interviews with the Salafi-jihadi inmates including Al-Zarqawi, argues that Al-Zarqawi's time in prison had a more radicalizing effect on him than anywhere else, including his years in Afghanistan. His hatred for state officials and tyrant Arab regimes was consolidated in prison, and he left as someone ready to take it to the extremes.⁶⁶ According to another inmate, the prison made him "more ruthless and, eventually, caused him to even overshadow his mentor, Al-Maqdisi, to become one of the most feared and respected figures among the prisoners."⁶⁷ In other words, his bitter experience in prison played a key role in widening the gap between

⁶⁵ Hussein F..الزرقاوي..القاعدة (Beirut: Dar Al-Hayal, 2005)

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Gerges.A *History of ISIS*, p.56

what Al-Zarqawi made of jihad, its scope and priorities and what others promoted including Bin Laden, Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Al-Maqdisi. This experience would therefore carry direct implications for the divisions within the Salafi-jihadi movement, although it would take a few more years to finalize the clear-cut division after the death of Al-Zarqawi. One could argue that his focus on the “near enemy”, at least in its earliest forms minus its sectarian agenda, is a result of the maltreatment in the Al-Suwaqa prison.

Al-Zarqawi was released from the prison in 1999 by the newly crowned King Abdullah II along with thousands of political prisoners including Al-Maqdisi. While Al-Maqdisi stayed in Jordan and faced multiple detentions, Al-Zarqawi left Jordan and first went to Pakistan with an intention to move to Chechnya. However, he was detained by the Pakistani security apparatus for the expiration of his permit. At the time he did not want to go to Afghanistan mostly because of the internal conflict among the mujahedeen, he simply did not want to be a part of this in-fighting.⁶⁸ However, after his release from custody, he moved to Afghanistan where he had previously lived up until 1993. In Afghanistan, Al-Zarqawi sought for autonomy from the established groups and instead he formed a military and ideological training center for the foreign fighters coming mostly from the Levant. He obviously laid the foundations of his future militant groupings through this center, and elevated his position among Salafi-jihadi circles. In the initial phases, to preserve his autonomy, he did not want to do direct business with Al-Qaeda. This has also something to do with his ideological and operational disagreements with Al-Qaeda as he found Al-Qaeda overly defensive and lacking in offensive strategies. However, in later periods, the number three figure within Al-Qaeda, Muhammed Makkawi a.k.a. Sayf Al-Adl, intermediated between him and Al-Qaeda, and mustered financial support for Al-Zarqawi’s training facility in Herat. Another figure was also important for Al-Zarqawi’s ties with Al-Qaeda. It was Abu Qatadah Al-Filistini who was released from prison in 2014 in Jordan after being acquitted of terror charges. Al-Zarqawi’s got his *tazkiya* (reference) from Al-Filistini which helped build trust between Al-Zarqawi and Al-Qaeda. This incidently did not mean that Al-Zarqawi subordinated himself to the Al-Qaeda Core. Rather, it was an alliance of convenience in which one side received financial help while the other built leverage on the

⁶⁸ Hussein. الجيل الثاني للقاعدة..الزرقاوي

group and kept a potential militant group in check. This proved to be a smart move by Al-Qaeda as the foreign fighters started to flow from the Levant, i.e. Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq, Jund Al-Sham was established and became the epicenter of volunteers from the Levant. The group then morphed into Jamaat Al-Tawhid w'al-Jihad (JTJ) which would carry its activities into Iraq and became one of the most efficient fighting forces of the Salafi-jihadi movements in Iraq.

9/11 was another turning point not only for Al-Zarqawi personally but also for the Salafi-jihadi movements in general. It was the most sensational attack on the so-called far enemy, which ironically brought the far enemy closer and deeper into the Muslim lands. In Afghanistan, he could not fight against the Soviets but now he had a chance to fight against another super power, the United States. Although he believed that priority should be given to the fight against the near enemy, fighting against the far enemy in Muslim lands was not an opportunity to be missed. As a matter of fact, the chaos theory of the Al-Zarqawi line of thought among Salafi-jihadis, as will be explained in the following chapters, involved provoking super powers' military intervention to Muslim lands, and Afghanistan was just the beginning. During the War in Afghanistan, Al-Zarqawi stayed and fought in Herat against the Afghans loyal to the coalition forces. His fighters excelled in the war and suffered light casualties. However, with the intensification of the coalition operations, he left Herat for Kandahar and his fighters fought in Kandahar and alongside the Taliban in the Tora Bora Battles. After the fall of Kandahar, where he injured his leg, he decided to leave Afghanistan.

His next destination was Iran; a country for which Al-Zarqawi would have a strong hatred. However, at the time he had limited options as he was not welcome in Pakistan and he could not return Jordan. There were already Al-Qaeda and JTJ cells inside Iran, and the stay of the incoming fighters from Afghanistan was facilitated by these cells. Iran meanwhile was a route that many Al-Qaeda militants including leadership used to leave Afghanistan. For example, Bin Laden's son-in-law Suleiman Abu Gaith left Afghanistan for Iran in 2002 one year after Al-Zarqawi's departure, and lived in Iran for eleven years until 2013. Al-Zarqawi's residence in Iran however was not as long as Abu Gaith's, as he moved to Sulaymaniya in Northern Iraq and made the town JTJ's headquarters. His passage

to Iraq was another turning point in Al-Zarqawi's ideological transformation, there he found a fertile ground in which he could pursue his sectarian agenda. His days in Iraq are characterized with the rise of sectarian tensions, and Al-Zarqawi, after a short hiatus in Afghanistan where he fought against the far enemy, would start focusing on the near enemy yet again by targeting not only American invaders but also their local collaborators as well as the Shiites. It was claimed that one of the turning points in terms of the sectarian strife in Iraq- the assassination of the renowned Shiite cleric Muhammad Baker Al-Hakim in front of the Imam Ali Mosque was planned by Al-Zarqawi. This assassination together with attacks by both sides deepened the sectarian tensions in Iraq which still continues with an alarming level of intensity.

Although Al-Zarqawi maintained close relations with Al-Qaeda since his days in Afghanistan, he still did not pledge his allegiance to Al-Qaeda and his leader Osama Bin Laden. In 2004, however, he pledged allegiance to Bin Laden and his JTJ became an organic part of Al-Qaeda. This was in effect a marriage of convenience, resembling the one that the two parties had back in Afghanistan upon Al-Zarqawi's arrival. Both sides stood to gain from this marriage: On the one hand, Al-Zarqawi hoped to expand JTJs' activities and scope, benefiting from the large human and financial pool of Al-Qaeda. At the end of the day, his group was at the margins of the global Salafi-jihadi circles and enjoyed only humble financial means. Al-Qaeda was still at the epicenter of the Salafi-jihadi circles, commanding much bigger financial and human resources. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, was not strong and well-organized in Iraq; therefore, the group hoped to enter the Iraqi scene through JTJ instead of having to form a presence from scratch. Iraq was a smart choice for Al-Zarqawi since he had more elbow-room and better opportunity to expand his activities than in Afghanistan. As a result of the agreement, the JTJ changed its name to *Tanzim Qaedat Al-Jihad Fi-Bilad Al-Rafidayn* (Organization of Jihad's base in Mesopotamia) and became known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) or Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (AQM). From 2004 until 2006, when Al-Zarqawi was killed in a US airstrike, the AQI committed numerous attacks against US and Shiite targets, foreign representations as well as against their leaders' homeland, Jordan.

It was Iraq that brought Al-Zarqawi into the limelight. When he was in Afghanistan, his organisation was one of the smaller groups both in size and importance. However, especially after merging with Al-Qaeda and a series of attacks against Jordanian, Iraqi and American targets, Al-Zarqawi gradually attracted the attention of the Americans. According to Loretta Napoleoni, a myth around his personality was created, and many actors on the ground benefited from that myth: “The Kurds could use him to convince the United States to bomb jihadist camps in northern Iraq. The Jordanians could use him to solve the mystery of a series of terror attacks carried out by local militants. And the Americans, intent on building their case for attacking Iraq, could use the shadowy figure of Zarqawi to link Saddam’s regime to the threat posed by al Qaeda.”⁶⁹ When Collin Powell added Al-Zarqawi in his presentation before the U.N. Security Council in 2003, he was later linked with almost all major terrorist attacks including 9/11.

Iraq also had a transformative effect on Al-Zarqawi’s methods and worldview. It was in Iraq that he started to give a sectarian spin to his fight by targeting Shiite holy sites and personalities. The sectarian divide, according to Al-Zarqawi, was both an ideological and practical necessity. Although Al-Zarqawi was never known for his authority in religious affairs, as his religious education was quite limited and short, he had one of the harshest interpretations of takfir. His definition of a *kafir* (infidel) included many Muslims, regardless of them being Sunnis or Shiites. Nevertheless, Shiites, according to him, are all infidels; therefore, killing them is permissible by religion. Al-Zarqawi said in a message posted on April 2005:

“O nation of Islam, you must know that the Shiite creed and Islam only meet as Jews and Christians meet under the name of the people of the book. The Shiites have distorted the Koran, insulted the prophet's companions, stabbed the mothers of the faithful, repudiated the people of Islam and spilled their blood, committed great sins and engaged in all kinds of superstitions, falsehoods, and myths... Let the entire world know that we are going ahead with God's help to kill their imams and cut off their heads to avenge Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman, and Ali, as well as Al-Hasan, Al-Husayn, and Aishah, and the blood that has been shed, the violated honors, and the usurped mosques. O snakes of evil, we will not stay our hands until you abandon our mosques, stop shedding the Sunni people's blood,

⁶⁹Napoleoni.Profile of a Killer.

*and stop dishonoring our prophet, May God's peace and blessings be upon him; and until you stop siding with the enemies, the Christians and Jews, in their war against Muslims.”*⁷⁰

He also believed that collateral killing of Muslims is permissible, differing from many other Salafi-jihadi clerics in this case. Al-Zarqawi says: “I want to make the Islamic position clear: There is no doubt that Allah orders us to kill and fight infidels by any means to reach that goal, but also those women, children and other infidels.”⁷¹ Provoking tension between the Shiites and the Sunnis was also a practical necessity for the jihadis in Iraq in order to prevent Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis from uniting their ranks.⁷² Failing to do so meant that the Iraqi insurgency may turn into a national Iraqi movement, making the foreign jihadis irrelevant. At the same time, jihadis needed public support, and the Sunnis were the only feasible audience from which the jihadis could gain some traction. Therefore in September 2005, Al-Zarqawi declared an all-out war on the Shiites⁷³, and scaled up attacks on Shiite targets.

In January 2006, the AQI merged with five other Salafi-jihadi groups who were the backbones of the Islamic resistance in Iraq and established a new umbrella organization called Mujahedeen Shura Council (MSC). The merger included *Jaysh Al-Taifa Al-Mansoura, Saraya Al-Jihad Al-Islami, Saraya Al-Ansar Al-Tawheed, Kataib Al-Ahwal and Saraya Al-Ghuraba*. The MSC was established out of a necessity to unify the ranks of like-minded Salafi-jihadi groups against the US, which had intensified its military operations, deepened its invasion and formed alliances with other Iraqi groups on the ground. Al-Zarqawi, who was a key figure in the merger, became the head of the council. There was another agenda behind the establishment of the MSC, and this agenda would shape the Salafi-jihadi insurgency's character in Iraq and have implications for its successor, ISIS. Al-Qaeda in Iraq mostly consisted of non-Iraqis like Al-Zarqawi and was having difficulties in reaching out to the local population, especially the Sunnis, for their support. So, merger with Salafi-jihadi groups staffed by Iraqi nationals was a strategic move towards increasing the Iraqi elements to strengthen the Iraqi character of the Salafi-jihadi

⁷⁰Al-Zarqawi, Abu Musab. 6 April 2005

⁷¹Al-Zarqawi, Abu Musab. 7 June 2005

⁷²Napoleoni. Profile of a Killer.

⁷³Al-Zarqawi, Abu Musab. 14 September 2005

movement spearheaded by the AQI. However, Al-Zarqawi's leadership at the MSC was cut short as he was killed with his entourage by a US F-16 airstrike in June 2006.

Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi founded an Iraq-based Salafi-jihadi movement both suffering and at the same time benefiting from the US invasion of Iraq. The Iraqization of the AQI started during his lifetime with the merger of Salafi-jihadi groups under the umbrella of MSC, and continued after his death. He left a movement with deepening roots in the Iraqi society, gradually establishing alliances with local forces. He was also a key figure in transforming the Al-Qaeda enterprise in Iraq into a strongly sectarian force. In this sense, he contributed greatly to the rising sectarian tensions and widening sectarian gap in the Iraqi society and beyond. He was also a staunch believer in the urgency of fighting the near enemy by giving special emphasis to the fight against the Shiites. His use of violence as a strategic weapon was rarely matched by any of his contemporary counterparts, and Muslims- Sunnis and Shiites- could not escape from this weapon. His use of *takfir* was also worth noting as he legitimized his group's killing of Muslims either by excommunicating them or by calling them collateral damage which, according to his understanding of the religious texts, is permissible.

After the death of Al-Zarqawi, Abu Ayyub Al-Masri replaced him as the emir of the MSC; however, only a few months later on 15 October 2006, a critical milestone in the history of Salafi-jihadi movements was reached with the declaration of Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi was declared as the emir of the ISI, supposedly superseding all other factions fighting inside Iraq. There is very limited information about the personality and life story of Al-Baghdadi, at one point US officials even argued that he might be a fictitious character. His real name was Hamid Davoud Muhammad Halil Al-Zawi, and he served in the Iraqi army as an officer.⁷⁴ Some sources claim that his family is descended from the Prophet's lineage. With Al-Baghdadi, we see that the ISI started emphasizing the Iraqiness and holy lineage of their emir by using the Al-Qureishi title to link Al-Baghdadi with the Prophet's extended family. This emphasis was the continuation of the Iraqization of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Iraq as well as an indication that the ISI

⁷⁴ Who was the real Abu Omar El-Baghdadi? (2010, Nisan 20), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*.<http://english.aawsat.com/2010/04/article55251030/who-was-the-real-abu-omar-al-baghdadi>

sought for both local and religious legitimacy through the personality of their emir. This quest for religious legitimacy was also the first step in laying the foundation of declaration of an Islamic caliphate, giving clues about ISI's future plans outside Iraq.

This was one small step for the regional politics, but one giant leap for the Salafi-jihadi organization which came from Al-Zarqawi's methodology. At least in theory, a Salafi-jihadi movement pronounced its claims for statehood by asking other groups' allegiance for the newly established "state" and its leader Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi. ISI indeed thought that the organization they commanded, with the land it controlled and the people it purported to rule, corresponded to a state in the modern sense of the word. The group compared itself with the earlier phases of the Islamic State in Medina in the 7th century with the logic that ISI's control of territory and people is much bigger than the Islamic State's in the 7th century. The issue of statehood did not come about uncontested. It triggered an intensive discussion among Salafi-jihadi circles, and became yet another matter of division between the Al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden schools. It seemed that the MSC did not consult with Al-Qaeda Core, and the declaration did not have the blessing of Bin Laden. Very much parallel with Bin Laden's concept of far enemy, the Islamic State as well as caliphate, were not at the top of the to-do list. Although Bin Laden thought they were the ultimate aim of the Salafi-jihadi movement, there were still stages to pass to reach that stage of statehood and caliphate. On the other side of the Salafi-jihadi spectrum, the Al-Zarqawi school believed that they had already reached the level of statehood, while it took them almost eight years to declare an Islamic caliphate. The declaration of ISI also had a strategic value for the unnamed rivalry between the two schools. As will be strongly emphasized in the later stages of ISI/ISIS, there was one state and other Salafi-jihadi movements, including Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which are like the non-state actors. Therefore, ISI had superiority over the other movements, including Al-Qaeda Core, while its leader Al-Baghdadi was *amir al-mumineen* (commander of the faithful) with a higher authority than any other militant leader on the ground. So, the declaration of state was a strategic move by Al-Zarqawi's disciples to gain the upper hand against the Al-Qaeda Core. In a sense the Al-Zarqawi school which was enabled and supported by Al-Qaeda, with Al-Zarqawi himself pledging

his allegiance to Bin Laden, albeit half-heartedly, was attempting to absorb Al-Qaeda by establishing itself at the center of the Salafi-jihadi enterprise in Iraq.

Al-Qaeda had been in the spotlight and enjoying disproportionate media attention for a long time. Especially after the 9/11 attacks, it became the number one enemy of the international community which, led by the US, conducted military interventions, invasions and all sorts of security operations in the West as well as in the Islamic world, most notably in Afghanistan, Yemen and Iraq against Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups. Partly because of the over emphasis on Al-Qaeda, there is a tendency to analyze and evaluate various Salafi-jihadi groups in the context of Al-Qaeda. In other words, concentrating on Al-Qaeda overshadowed the analyses of nuances and divergences among Salafi-jihadi groups. However, the Salafi-jihadi groups differ greatly in terms of their methodologies, their worldviews, their understanding of jihad, their application of *takfir*, and their relations with other Muslims. Having said this, one should also note that Al-Qaeda led many of these Salafi-jihadi groups and maintained its central role among these groups. In later periods, however, especially after the declaration of ISI, the leadership of the Salafi-jihadi groups turned into an issue of rivalry; and as far as Iraq is concerned, Al-Zarqawi's brainchild ISI absorbed most of these groups and even rallied the AQI under the ISI banner. This became much clearer when the AQI pledged allegiance to ISI within a short period of time. Despite the AQI's subordination to ISI, the rivalry over the leadership of the Salafi-jihadi circles continues well into today. Al-Qaeda maintained its upper-hand in this rivalry until 2013; but with the transformation of ISI into ISIS and its rapid expansion in Iraq and Syria, Al-Zarqawi's newly formed ISI/ISIS gradually positioned itself at the center of attention and gained the upper-hand in the rivalry over Al-Qaeda Core. Hence, one could easily find the roots of rivalry and clashes between Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISI's successor ISIS in the early 2000's, coming to a peak in 2006.

3.3. The *Sahwa* Councils, the Iraqization Efforts, and the Alliance between ISI and Saddam Era Officers

The period between 2007 and 2009 was particularly difficult for the ISI, as they started to face dire military and financial challenges which they had not been accustomed to tackling. In this period, ISI tried to diminish its financial dependency on sources coming from abroad; that is to say mostly from financiers in the Gulf, as well as other contributions from the global Salafi-jihadi community. To this end, ISI accelerated its efforts to mobilize more financial resources inside Iraq, and resorted to smuggling, kidnapping for ransom and extortion to expand and diversify its funding sources. Meanwhile, ISI had to face a military challenge with social repercussions, starting from the Sunni dominated Anbar province and expanding towards other areas. ISI started to have problems with the Sunni tribes which ISI considered as its societal base and potential allies; and heavy clashes ensued. The *Sahwa* Councils were established in this period in the Anbar province with initial support from the US. The *Sahwa* Councils was a US supported project, but local tribes also took the initiative to protect their territory and bring about a semblance of normality and stability. The *Sahwa* Councils aimed to take the clashes in their areas under control, and this effort involved fighting against Salafi-jihadi groups such as AQI and ISI. In other words, local Sunni tribes were mobilized against Salafi-jihadi groups both with local motivations and with US encouragement and military support.

Sahwa means awakening in Arabic, and it symbolizes the Sunni tribes' as well as some ex-Baathists' efforts to reclaim their cities and towns from ISI and other Salafi-jihadi groups' control and influence. The Anbar Salvation Council (ASC) was established first, becoming a model for further local *Sahwa* councils. The biggest challenge for ISI coming from the *Sahwa* councils was sociological rather than militaristic, although the Councils also operated efficiently militarily. The composition of the councils posed a direct threat to ISI who was counting on the support of the local Sunni tribes. This meant the societal base of ISI was narrowing, turning the group into an unwanted entity by Sunnis, Shiites and Americans alike.

ISI went through two critical junctures here as a result of the fight against the Sahwa Councils. The first was societal. The previously established bonds between ISI and other Salafi-jihadi groups and most of the Iraqi Sunnis were ruptured. While some Sunnis considered Salafi-jihadi movements as part of the resistance during the early phases of the invasion of Iraq; the divide between the two parties widened, and most Iraqi Sunnis started to see these groups as a nuisance and liability. The Sahwa Councils symbolized the peak in this divide, and the Sunni tribes prioritized fighting against these Salafi-jihadi groups with American support. The second critical juncture came into being because of the military gains of the Sahwa Councils and had organizational consequence for ISI. In this process, almost 85% of the ISI leadership was killed in clashes with the Sahwa Councils and also by US airstrikes. Heavy casualties inflicted on ISI created deep waves within the ISI structure. The group weakened militarily due to the loss of experienced militants and key figures in the leadership cadres; and disillusioned foreign fighters started to leave. In other words, ISI started to lose its attractiveness among the Salafi-jihadi circles not only because of the heavy casualties but also ISI's failure in delivering and preserving its prophecy: An Islamic state. As a result of these changes on the ground as well as paradigm shifts inside ISI, the organization went underground, established sleeping cells, and tried to protect its core to prepare for the next phase of its insurgency. The fight against ISI, the predecessor of ISI, became successful at least for the moment thanks to the Sahwa Councils and US operations. However, as we all witnessed in the case of ISI, if the root causes which facilitate and enable these groups' emergence and expansion are not addressed, these type of groups can easily resurrect when they find the necessary social, political and security atmosphere. Therefore, the embattled ISI went underground only to regroup and wait for the right moment to reclaim its sphere of influence in Iraq.

The period between 2008 until autumn 2011, when the peaceful demonstrations started to morph into an armed insurgency in Syria, was the period of recovery and reorganization for ISI. This period was characterized and shaped by four important trends and developments in Iraq which increased ISI's operational capabilities, transformed it into a professionalized group, reclaiming its sociological support base that was ruptured during the Sahwa years. First of all, Nuri Al-Maliki became the prime minister of Iraq after the

elections in November 2005, assuming rights and responsibilities of other ministerial portfolios including the positions of Interior Minister, Defense Minister and National Security Minister. He positioned himself at the intersection of Iranian and American interests in Iraq, getting the blessings of these two key countries to ascend to power in the post-invasion Iraq. The fragmented nature of the Iraqi politics, use of “de-Baathification”—the process of removing the Ba’ath Party members from public office in Iraq following the US-led invasion of 2003 - as a method of witch-hunting against the Sunni politicians, and increasing Shiite domination in Iraqi affairs- enabled Al-Maliki to consolidate his political and military power in Iraq. He insisted on keeping the security portfolios, and later started to crackdown on Sunni politicians including the Vice President Tariq Al-Hashimi and the Finance Minister Rafi Al-Issawi from the Sunni heartland of the Anbar province. Political power sharing and reconciliation never worked in Iraqi politics as Al-Maliki maintained his dominance over state institutions, key bureaucratic posts, intelligence and the Iraqi army. He used extra-constitutional military groups such as the Office of the Commander-in-Chief to bypass the Interior and Defense Ministries, attached most elite military units directly to his office, filled top as well as lower echelons of the Iraqi army with his loyalists, and undermined the system of checks and balances in the Iraqi constitution to shape Iraqi security and political apparatuses according to his political agenda.⁷⁵ This monopoly of power marginalized most Sunnis while, especially in the earlier periods, even some Shiite groups could not escape from Al-Maliki’s crackdowns. The Sunni resentment against the central government of Iraq reached its peak, and the nepotistic and sectarian character of security bodies made them incompetent and illegitimate in the eyes of many resentful Sunnis. Ironically, the Sunni tribes, who had just recently been fighting under the *Sahwa* Councils against ISI and other Salafi-jihadi groups, suffered the most from Al-Maliki’s sectarian and authoritarian policies, and that eventually pushed a number of them to consider establishing alliances with their previous foes, ISI.

Secondly, ISI followed a two-tier strategy by targeting the Sahwa leaders via assassinations and at the same time reaching out to the Sunni populations in an effort to exploit anti-Al-Maliki, anti-central government and anti-Shiite resentment among

⁷⁵ See Sullivan M., *Maliki’s Authoritarian Regime*. Institute for the Study of War. April 2013.

marginalized Sunni groups. There were two, sometimes overlapping target groups: Saddam era officers and Sunni tribes. ISI worked hard to channel the anti-Al-Maliki resentment towards an armed insurgency by positioning itself as the champion of Sunni rights and the only capable body which could militarily resist the increasing domination of the sectarian government in Baghdad. ISI also wished to demonstrate to the Sunni tribes that the Sahwa Councils contributed to the Shiite domination in Iraq, and the tribes' siding with the US against fellow Sunnis was a grave mistake. Meanwhile, ISI also reached out to a particular group of Sunnis with whom Salafi-jihadi groups had previous contacts and engagements: the Saddam era military and intelligence officers.

The strategic alliance between ISI and the Saddam era officers was a very significant development that created paradigm shifts within the organizational structure of ISI. The contact between Salafi-jihadi groups in Iraq and the Saddam era army intelligence officers dates back to much earlier periods, it is well-established that certain Saddam era officers such as Samir Al-Khilfawi (Hajj Bakr) and Adnan Al-Bilawi fought with Salafi-jihadi groups even during the JTJ times. The first contact between Salafi-jihadis and Saddam's officers, according to some scholars, was established during 1990's after the Iran-Iraq War when Saddam was trying to consolidate the Baath Party by expanding its popular support base and exploiting sectarian divisions within Iraqi society.⁷⁶ In this period, Saddam's deep state took steps towards strengthening Sunni Islamic institutions in Iraq against the increasing influence of "Zoroastrian" Iran, and to this end, institutions such as the Islamic University of Baghdad was established and sponsored by Saddam. It is quite telling that one of the most well-known graduates of this university is none other than the future leader of ISI/ISIS who tops the wanted lists all over the world, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. A hybrid form of relationship was created by the Saddam regime among the Baathists, Arab nationalists and Salafis in solidarity with the years-long sanctions regime.⁷⁷

⁷⁶Natali D., The Islamic State's Baathist roots.*Al-Monitor*. 24 April 2015

⁷⁷ For further discussions about the relations between Salafi-jihadi groups and the Saddam era officers see Baram A., *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003: Ba`thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014)

Between 2009 and 2011, the relationship between ISI and the Saddam era officers turned into a strategic partnership, and some of the officers contributed greatly to ISI's military strategy and establishment of an intelligence gathering network. The most relevant question here is whether this partnership was based on pragmatism to the benefit of both sides or was there an ideological marriage between the two parties? What were the main sources of motivation for the Saddam era officers to join or fight together with first ISI and then ISIS? This question is particularly important because there is a widespread misunderstanding due to the overgeneralization and exaggeration about the role of the Saddam era officers within ISI/ISIS. There are those who consider ISI/ISIS as the Baathists' brainchild; while there are also those who ignore the critical role that the Saddam era officers played inside ISI/ISIS. The answer, to the question of motives, lies somewhere in between these two.

When we consider the strict ideology of ISI, one could safely assume that at least some of the Saddam era officers who joined the ranks of ISI/ISIS did convert to the Salafi-jihadi ideology and became believers in ISI's creed and methodology. Because, although the partnership was mutually beneficial for both sides, it would be very difficult for the Baathists, who were Arab nationalists and secularists, to maintain that partnership with a group which even excommunicates other Salafi-jihadis. Therefore, it is highly likely that there were new converts with Baathist backgrounds who mediated and bridged the gap between ISI and the Saddam era officers. One of the most critical links between the two parties was apparently established in Camp Bucca, where some of the Saddam era military and intelligence officers met key Salafi-jihadi figures and converted to ISI's creed. Famous inmates of Camp Bucca included, besides the emir of ISI/ISIS Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, ex-officers such as Hajj Bakr, ISIS' ex-governor of Syria Abu Ali Al-Anbari, ISIS' ex-governor of Iraq Abu Muslim Al-Turkmani and the spokesperson of ISIS Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani. Interestingly, an ex-inmate of Camp Bucca who served at the same period with Al-Baghdadi recounts that Al-Baghdadi had a relatively comfortable term in prison and acted as a mediator between inmates and the administration of the Camp.⁷⁸ Many of the ISIS leadership were jailed in Camp Bucca; and very much like Al-Zarqawi's experience in Al-

⁷⁸ Interview with Muzamjeer Al-Sham, 23 February 2016.

Suwaqa Prison, Camp Bucca played a unique role in the radicalization of ex-officers, and the Salafis with no previous connections to ISI. Camp Bucca, in a way, turned into a radicalization and indoctrination camp where different ideologies converged under and became dominated by ISI's Salafi-jihadism.

A problematic point about the nature of relations between ISI/ISIS and the Saddam era officers is the overuse of the term Baathists. Every single state official, whether in the civil bureaucracy or in the security apparatuses, had to be Baathist at least in terms of membership or in theory. However, Baathism as an ideology was long outmoded, if not dead, even during the later periods of the Saddam regime. Therefore, analyzing the Saddam era officers who joined or collaborated with ISI/ISIS in the context of Baathism as an ideology is at best misleading. After the US invasion of Iraq, Baathism became a political rather than an ideological term to define the remnants of the Saddam regime. Baathism was delegitimized and illegalized via the debaathification process (*Ijtisas al-Baath*) which turned into a form of witch hunting aimed at liquidating the remnants of the old regime as well as political opponents. When one again considers the fact that official posts required Baathist connections during the Saddam era, arbitrary use of debaathification was a convenient tool to sideline rivals and monopolize power as widely exemplified during Al-Maliki's authoritarian rule. On these premises, not only key figures of the Saddam regime but also highly peripheral figures and even ordinary state officials were purged, and some of them were even imprisoned. In short, debaathification became a delegitimizing tool to discard political opponents, and obviously the Sunnis of Iraq suffered greatly from this purge. This is probably why some Sunnis interviewed by the author in Iraq argued that exaggeration of the Baath component inside ISI/ISIS is yet another effort by the central government and its supporter to discard the legitimate demands and concerns of the Sunni population in Iraq.⁷⁹

An ideological analysis about the partnership between ISI and the Saddam era officers still does not give the whole picture, as some of the Saddam era officers did not share ISI's ideology. These are the ones who approached ISI with nationalistic and/or sectarian

⁷⁹Interview with Hussam Muhammed, a lecturer at the Mosul University. 23 December 2015.

motivation and wanted to forge a partnership against the common enemies: USA, Iran and some Shiite groups who were collaborating with the enemies. In this type of partnership, ideological affinity was not a prerequisite. For them, ISI was the most effective tool to free Iraq from US and Iranian invasion and Shiite domination, as well as to take revenge from the groups dominating the central government who had purged the Saddam era officers indiscriminately. Here, one should also be reminded of the fact that some of the Saddam era officers chose to collaborate with the US during the invasion. So, it would be wrong to assume that the remnants of the old regime stayed as one unified bloc during the invasion and its aftermath. Another important point with regard to the partnership between ISI/ISIS and the Saddam era officers is that some of the partnerships which were established on pragmatic grounds did not last long. In other words, pragmatic partnerships are shorter lasting than ideological partnerships in the case of ISI/ISIS. One striking example is the partnership between ISIS and the Naqshbandi Army led by Saddam era top general Izeddin Al-Duri. The two groups established an effective alliance between January and June 2014 to capture Fallujah and Mosul from government forces. However, fierce clashes started between the two groups almost immediately after their joint venture. The Naqshbandi Army first clashed with ISIS in Hawijah, and the conflict widened when Al-Duri refused to pledge allegiance to Al-Baghdadi and rejected ISIS' violent war strategy. After the clashes in May 2015, Al-Duri announced that there was not and will never be an alliance between the two parties and denounced ISIS' brutal tactics.⁸⁰

One could rightly argue that the alliance between ISI and the Saddam era officers, regardless of under what premise and with what motivations it was established, played a critical role in transforming ISI, which was relatively ill-organized and amateurish, into a professional and hierarchical body with state-like features. These officers played a particularly critical role in the professionalization of ISI's military and intelligence apparatus, in designing its war tactics and intelligence gatherings. They did not only come with their experience in military arts and intelligence gathering; they also brought their extensive network throughout Iraq stretching into Syria with them, and offered this

⁸⁰ Al-Tamini, A.J., (2015, Haziran) "*Enemy of My Enemy: Re-evaluating the Islamic State's relationship with Ba'athist JRTN*". Rubin Center Research in International Affairs.

invaluable network to the use of ISI. The rapid expansion of ISI/ISIS had a lot to do with this professionalism and experience. Most notably the Salafi-jihadis with years of fighting experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia etc. made a difference on the ground against Syrian insurgents, the majority of whom used to be civilians with little military experience before the beginning of the insurgency.⁸¹Hajj Bakr, who was killed on January 2014 by the FSA affiliated Kataib w'Alwiya Shuhada Suriya in Tal Rifaat in Norther Syria, is a great illustration of the Saddam era officers' contribution to ISI/ISIS and the positions they occupy within the high ranks of ISI.⁸²Based on the interviews this author conducted with representatives of various Syrian armed groups, including those with Salafi-jihadi backgrounds, Hajj Bakr was one of the most influential persons on Al-Baghdadi, and he was the chief architect of ISI/ISIS' structure, especially intelligence, in Syria.⁸³ An intelligence officer under the Saddam regime, Hajj Bakr also served prison time in the notorious Camp Bucca. Syrian opposition groups raided his house in Tal Rifaat, and captured important ISIS documents which then were given to the German Magazine Der Spiegel. According to these documents, which were dubbed Hajj Bakr Documents, Hajj Bakr first opened a da'wah office in Syria, and used this office to gather intelligence and recruit new militants. The documents were asking ISI/ISIS' assets on the ground to gather intelligence and information about local influential families, their sources of income, number of opposition fighters in different groups, their leaders as well as highly sensitive and confidential information about their personal relations for future blackmailing purposes. The documents also made it very clear that Hajj Bakr devised the whole intelligence apparatus of ISI/ISIS in Syria, and appointed officers to lead various branches of the intelligence organization.⁸⁴ Until his death on January 2014, Hajj Bakr served as ISI/ISIS' number one in Syria and led the Military Council. After his death, he was replaced by yet another Saddam era officer, Abu Abdurrahman Al-Bilawi. Hajj Bakr remains to have been one of the most influential strategists of ISI/ISIS whom Al-Baghdadi trusted and delegated power.

⁸¹ Gerges F., *A History of ISIS*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) p. 149

⁸² Lister. *The Syrian Jihad*. p.197

⁸³ Interviews with members of Ahrar Al-Sham, Faylaq Ar-Rahman and Jaysh Al-Islam

⁸⁴ Reuter C., "The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State". *Der Spiegel*. 18 April 2015.

Thirdly, the bitter experience with the *Sahwa* Councils, rapprochement with some Sunni tribes, the alliance with the Saddam era officers, and the decrease in the number of incoming foreign fighters made ISI focus on the Iraqi identity of the group, to convince the local population that ISI is a predominantly Iraqi organization led by Iraqis. Therefore, this period was characterized by an Iraqization trend, and ISI started to highlight its Iraqi character. The group moved its headquarters to Mosul, where “existing Arab-Kurdish tensions could be exploited.”⁸⁵ After Abu Ayyub Al-Masri, an Egyptian in origin, two Iraqis Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi and the current leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi occupied the highest post in ISI/ISIS, and their Iraqi origins were often highlighted. Ironically, the foreign fighters who left the group especially after the clashes with the *Sahwa* Councils contributed to the new identity of ISI which would later be appreciated by the group. While the number of foreign fighters inside ISI diminished, the ratio of the Iraqis increased automatically, and this process of “natural selection” eventually helped the group’s efforts at Iraqization.

Lastly, the Americans first downsized their military presences in Iraq, and then initiated the process of full withdrawal by December 2011. Although the US left a considerable amount of military and support personnel and private contractors in Iraq, the downsized US presence in Iraq and the neglect by Al-Maliki government in Baghdad weakened the *Sahwa* Councils, making many of the *Sahwa* fighters disenchanted with the US and the central government. When the *Sahwa* project began crumbling, this created an invaluable opportunity that was open for exploitation by ISI. During this period ISI established contacts with the *Sahwa* members, after assassinating many of their leaders, and tried to expand its social base while also strengthening its Iraqi character. In this sense, the US withdrawal was as much criticized as the US invasion of Iraq since the premature US withdrawal created a power vacuum which was filled by the authoritarian Al-Maliki government.

3.4. The Emir of ISIS: Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi

⁸⁵ Lister C., *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), p. 14

A lot has been written on the personal history and personality of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi after the emergence and rapid expansion of ISI/ISIS in Syria. Some pundits even argued that he might not be a real person as once claimed for his predecessor Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi.⁸⁶ However, for those studying on the Salafi-jihadi movements, Al-Baghdadi was not an unknown person, although he was not as well-known as Salafi-jihadi top figures such as Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, Ayman Al-Zawahiri or Osama Bin Laden. Many Salafi-jihadi met Al-Baghdadi at Camp Bucca where he was not a significant figure within the Salafi-jihadi community. Hence, his rapid ascension to power and the excessive media attention he gained after the capture of Mosul was a bit of a surprise for those who previously knew him. Primarily because he was not someone known for his leadership qualities in the Salafi-jihadi circles, and as a matter of fact, he did not have a long history with the Salafi-jihadi movements. However, as ISI weakened considerably during the Sahwa years and many of its leaders were killed either by Sahwa Councils or US airstrikes, some previously insignificant figures like Al-Baghdadi rose to prominence in the organization.

Al-Baghdadi was born in 1971 in Samarra, which is located to the north of Baghdad. His birth name is Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Al-Badri. Those who know his childhood describe him as a quiet, sweet tempered and pious person who started to receive religious education during his childhood. They also say that Al-Baghdadi was introduced to Salafi ideology in his early adolescent years, when the Soviet-Afghan War influenced him deeply and Salafi-jihadi ideology started to shape his worldview.⁸⁷ One of his neighbors, for example, recalls that he studied the case of Taliban and felt an affinity for the Taliban experience in Afghanistan.⁸⁸ Al-Baghdadi, who would follow in the footsteps of Al-Zarqawi's takfirism in the future, was introduced with the takfiri ideology very early and looked at state institutions, especially the army, through takfiri lenses. He believed that the army and other state institutions should embrace Islam as the main code of conduct.

⁸⁶ Gordon M. R., Leader of Al Qaeda group in Iraq was fictional, U.S. military says. *The New York Times*. 18 July 2007

⁸⁷ Interview with Ghassan Al-Rashid, a neighbor and childhood friend of Al-Baghdadi in Samarra. 12 March 2016.

⁸⁸ Interview with Ghassan Al-Rashid.

After finishing his elementary and secondary education in Samarra, he went to study at the Islamic University of Baghdad, which was established by the Saddam regime as a part of the faith campaign to promote Sunni Islamic institutions against the rising influence of Iranian Shiism. He received his Master's and PhD degree at the same university in Islamic Sciences, in Qur'anic recitation to be more specific, and served in the army as an imam and preacher as was the practice among many other graduates of the Sharia faculty. His acquaintances from the occupation years notes that he is an eloquent preacher;⁸⁹ while the world would not listen to his first public speech until July 5, 2014 when he delivered the Friday sermon after the capture of Mosul.⁹⁰ He moved to Baghdad with his family a few years before the US invasion, lived in the Tobchi district and gave seminars in the local mosques.

Sources interviewed by this author argue that Al-Baghdadi's organizational ties date back to the early 2000's, when well-known Iraqi religious scholar and jihadi leader Mohammad Hardan became an influential person in Al-Baghdadi's early ideological formation as a Salafi-jihadi.⁹¹ It is claimed that Hardan influenced Al-Baghdadi in both religious and military affairs, and the latter's first organizational affiliation with a Salafi-jihadi groups was with Jaysh Al-Mujahedeen, which was led by Hardan himself. One of the claimants is Al-Mansour, a religious scholar affiliated with Jaysh Al-Mujahedeen, who said that he was a mentor for Al-Baghdadi. According to Al-Mansour, Al-Baghdadi was mediocre at best in religious and military affairs during his years with the Jaysh Al-Mujahedeen.⁹² Al-Baghdadi kept his affiliation with Jays Al-Mujahedeen, albeit for a short period of time, and he served as a "courier" between the field commanders of a subgroup called Jund Al-Huda.⁹³ In 2003, however, he started to take a more active role in Salafi-jihadi circles by taking a pioneering role in the establishment of Jaysh Al-Sunna w'Al-

⁸⁹Interview with Muzamjeer Al-Sham.

⁹⁰ISIS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi first Friday sermon as so-called 'Caliph'. *Al-Arabiya*. 5 July 2015. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/webtv/reports/2014/07/07/ISIS-Abu-Bakr-al-Baghdidi-first-Friday-sermon-as-so-called-Caliph-.html>

⁹¹Issam W., «البيغدادي» خرج من سجن بوكا أكثر تطرفا وكفر بـ«الإخوان»... ودرّسه الفقه عالم صوفي, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*. 20 October 2014. <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=237500>

⁹²Statement by Abu Abdullah Muhammad Al-Mansour. <https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/448534394328735744>

⁹³Interview with Muzamjeer Al-Sham.

Jamaat (JASJ) and became one of the Shura Council members in the group. When the JSAJ participated in the formation of the Mujahedeen Shura Council, which later would transform into ISI, Al-Baghdadi found himself a spot in the higher echelons of ISI.

As was the case with much of the other Salafi-jihadi leadership in Iraq, Camp Bucca became a critical turning point for Al-Baghdadi's career in the Salafi-jihadi movements. Camp Bucca was a detention facility administered by the United States near the city of Um Qasr in Iraq. The facility was named after Ronald Bucca, a New York City Fire Marshall who died in the 9/11 attacks. It was previously used by the British but taken over by the US in 2003 and used by the Americans until 2009. It was America's largest detention facility in Iraq, and its design and facilities made socializing among inmates possible. For example, the inmates reportedly organized religious classes and sport activities among themselves. In six years of operation between 2003 and 2009, the number of detainees in the camp varied from year to year. For example, approximately 7,000 to 8,000 detainees were held at Camp Bucca in 2004⁹⁴, while it held more than 6,000 detainees around 2005⁹⁵. The Camp was expanded in March 2007 due to the increasing number of detainees which reached around 13,800 after the Baghdad security operation. In 2009, the camp's population was reported to be little over 10,000.⁹⁶ An important demographic detail about the Camp is that the Sunnis made up around 80% of the detainees.⁹⁷ Many detained from the Abu Gureyb prison were transferred to Camp Bucca after the scandal at the Abu Gureyb which involved physical and sexual abuse of detainees by the US guards. The Americans tried to make an example out of Camp Bucca and create a model for detention camps with the hope that "this model prison will bury the ghosts of the Abu Ghraib abuse scandal."⁹⁸

The Abu Gureyb scandal helped in improving the conditions of Camp Bucca, and the detainees were given spaces to run their own classes, do sports and socialize. The camp was divided into compounds which held between 600 and 800 detainees apiece, "the

⁹⁴http://www.nbcnews.com/id/4894001/ns/nbc_nightly_news_with_brian_williams/t/us-army-report-iraqi-prisoner-abuse/

⁹⁵<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2005/04/mil-050415-mnfi-mnci03.htm>

⁹⁶<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1884183,00.html>

⁹⁷http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2007-03-15/news/0703140922_1_camp-bucca-camp-cropper-iraqi

⁹⁸ "Camp Bucca Turns 180 Degrees From Abu Ghraib". *Los Angeles Times*. 19 January 2005. <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jan/19/world/fg-bucca19>

inmates elected their own "mayor" who was in charge of maintaining order and acting as a liaison with the guards, if necessary, informing on impending escape attempts or culprits in a violent crime."⁹⁹ In 2008 Maj. Gen. Douglas Stone, the commander of the camp at the time described the camp as a jihadist university.¹⁰⁰ Adel Jasim Mohammed, a former detainee of Camp Bucca, told Al-Jazeera in 2009 that US officials did nothing to stop radicals from indoctrinating young detainees at the camp. "Extremists had the freedom to educate the young detainees. I saw them giving courses using classroom boards on how to use explosives, weapons and how to become suicide bombers." He also added that "In 2005, an extremist was sent to our camp. At first, Sunnis and Shias rejected his teachings. But we were told that he was imposed by the prison authority... He stayed for a week and recruited 25 of the 34 detainees - they became extremists like him."¹⁰¹

Camp Bucca, according to some of the inmates, produced mainly two types of people: collaborators and staunch Salafi-jihadis. Unconstitutional interrogation methods, including use of chemicals and waterboarding, were widely used at the Camp, with some of the inmates opting to cooperate with the camp administration to avoid torture, blackmailing of family members and other inhumane methods commonly practised. This is why some of the interviewees who had intimate knowledge about the Camp's inner workings argued that it was like an American spy factory, where Americans turned inmates into collaborators.¹⁰² It was also a radicalization factory. The harsh treatment of the inmates and other interrogation methods triggered a psychological transformation of some of the inmates towards Salafi-jihadi ideology which, they came to believe, was the only effective method of resistance against the US and its collaborators. At the same time, the socializing at the Camp also provided a unique setting for the inmates to congregate, listen to the Salafi-jihadi ideologues and discuss the religious aspects and methods of resistance.

Al-Baghdadi was kept at Camp Bucca between February 2004 and December 2004 for roughly 10 months as a "civilian detainee, which means he was not a member of a foreign armed force or militia, but was still held for security reasons. His "civilian

⁹⁹ ibid

¹⁰⁰ Inside Iraq's main prison. 28 April 2008. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIksx1_uzH0

¹⁰¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2009/12/2009121274712823455.html>

¹⁰² Interview with Muzamjeer Al-Sham

occupation” was identified as administrative work (secretary)”¹⁰³ As mentioned earlier, his days at Camp Bucca were relatively comfortable. He established cordial relations with inmates coming from a wide range of backgrounds, including Salafi-jihadi leaders, the Saddam era officers and other political prisoners, and he also maintained ties with the camp administration. According to some accounts, he served as an intermediary between the inmates and the camp administration, and this probably made him a useful asset for the camp administration which consequently provided him with better living conditions in the Camp.¹⁰⁴ According to some accounts including the one by his fellow inmate, Camp Bucca played two highly transformative roles in Al-Baghdadi’s career in the Salafi-jihadi movement.

First of all, the foundations of the critical alliance between Salafi-jihadi movement and the Saddam era officials, which was discussed earlier in this chapter, were laid down during these years when the two parties were imprisoned at the Camp and had enough time to gap differences, strategize and prepare a road map. Although imprisoned during different periods at Camp Bucca, it is not a coincidence that most of the key personalities within ISI/ISIS served some time at the Camp. (See Table 1) From Al-Baghdadi and his deputy Abu Muslim Al-Turkmani to the key military commander Abu Ayman Al-Iraqi, Al-Baghdadi’s right-hand man Hajj Bakr, ISIS’ spokesperson Al-Adnani etc., most of the high ranking officers in what would become known as ISIS were exposed to the harsh conditions of Camp Bucca. He met some of these figures for the first time at the Camp, and was introduced to others through his contacts and network gained at the Camp. Secondly, Al-Baghdadi’s ideological radicalization was completed at Camp Bucca.¹⁰⁵ He entered the Camp as an insignificant and a negligible figure in the Salafi-jihadi movement, however, shortly after his release from the Camp, he rapidly rose to prominence in the movement, becoming the leader of the largest Salafi-jihadi grouping in Iraq. It is not that he was not well-versed in Salafi-jihadi ideology, his contact with the Salafi-jihadi ideology dates back to the Soviet-Afghan War at least at an intellectual level. However, his late involvement

¹⁰³ See his personal file here: <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-declassified-iraq-prison-file-2015-2>

¹⁰⁴ Chulov M., Isis: the inside story. *The Guardian*, 18 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story>

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Abu Yahya, one of the inmates at the Camp Bucca. 21 March 2016.








with Salafi-jihadi movement at an organizational level demonstrates that he was not fully convinced about taking part in an armed struggle, and this partly explains why it took years for him to formally take part in a Salafi-jihadi group as a devoted member.

An interesting discussion about Al-Baghdadi's Bucca connection revolves around his relatively short stay and early release from the Camp. Many of the anti-ISIS Salafi-jihadis in Syria claimed to this author that he was released from Camp Bucca, which was an "American spy factory", as an informant.¹⁰⁶ Leaving aside this claim that is difficult to substantiate, Al-Baghdadi's short stay at Camp Bucca deserves due attention. This short stay can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, this may indicate that the Americans did not have accurate or sufficient intelligence on Al-Baghdadi and his role within the Salafi-jihadi circles in Iraq. This also means that the camp administration could not decipher Al-Baghdadi's mind and indict him due to his organic ties with the JASJ. Second, he was indeed a highly insignificant and negligible figure inside the JASJ in particular and in the Salafi-jihadi movements in general until his internment at Camp Bucca on February 2004. Regardless of the duration of his stay in Bucca, the Camp turned out to be an invaluable asset in his Salafi-jihadi resume.

¹⁰⁶Interview with Muzamjeer Al-Sham.

Table 1: ISIS Leadership with the Camp Bucca Experience¹⁰⁷

Leaders of ISIS who have been detained at Camp Bucca

<p style="text-align: center;">Abu Baker Al-Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Al-Samarrai) Leader of ISIS</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Fadil Ahmad Al-Turkmani (Abu Muslim Al-Turkmani) Deputy yo Al-Baghdadi Former Lt.Col. in Military Intelligence <i>Killed in Aug. 2015</i></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Abu Ayman Al-Iraqi (Abu Muhammad Al-Suwaida) Senior Leader and member of military council of ISIS Former colonel of Air Force Intelligence <i>Killed in Nov. 2014</i></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Abu Abdulrahman Al-Bilawi (Adnan Ismail Najm) Former Senior leader of military council <i>Killed in Jun. 2014</i></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Haju Baker (Samir Abd Muhammed Al-Hifawi) Senior Leader of ISIS <i>Killed in Jan. 2014</i></p> 
<p style="text-align: center;">Abu Suja (Abdulrahman Al-Afri) Responsible of sponsorship program for orphans and martyrs' families <i>Killed in Nov.2014</i></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani (Taha Subhi Fallaha) Senior leader and spokesman of ISIS <i>Killed in Aug. 2016</i></p> 			

Starting with his release from the Camp Bucca on December 2004 until his ascension to the top position at the ISI in 2010, Al-Baghdadi established himself as an increasingly significant figure in the Salafi-jihadi movement in Iraq. Although we have relatively more information about his activities after 2006, the period between his release and 2004 is relatively unknown. According to @wikibaghdady and Muzamjeer Al-Sham, twitter users with intimate knowledge on the personality of Al-Baghdadi and the history and structure of ISIS, Al-Baghdadi stayed in the Shiite stronghold Sayyida Zainab district in Damascus until 2006, and fostered ties with the officers of the Assad regime.¹⁰⁸ Hisham Al-Hashimi, an Iraqi analyst specialized in ISIS, also confirms that Al-Baghdadi lived in Syria during this period. According to the US intelligence, however, Al-Baghdadi lived in

¹⁰⁷ Barrett, R, *The Islamic State*. The Soufan Group, November 2014. p.20

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Muzamjeer Al-Sham

the border town of Al-Qaim in Iraq where his was involved in the persecution and torture of civilians.¹⁰⁹

Al-Baghdadi became affiliated with the JASJ, Mujahedeen Shura Council and ISI respectively due to the mergers among the Salafi-jihadi groups, and partly because of his identity as an Iraqi with Al-Qureishi lineage and his education in Islamic sciences. However the fact that ISI lost three of its leaders in four years aided Al-Baghdadi's rapid, if not unexpected, climb to the top of ISI's hierarchy. He previously served on the Religious Council of ISI and the Coordination Committee, which was tasked with ensuring the cooperation among field commanders in Iraq. Following the death of ISI's emir Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi, in an American rocket attack, he became the new emir of ISI after receiving the support of nine out of eleven Shura Council members in April 2010.¹¹⁰ According to Al-Hashimi, three factors played a decisive role in Al-Baghdadi's election as the new emir. Firstly, Al-Baghdadi's membership of the Al-Qureish tribe, in the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad. Secondly, Al-Baghdadi's closeness to the previous emir, due to his position at the Religious Council of ISI. Thirdly, his relative youth compared to the other candidates which, according to the members of the Shura Council, was a preferable qualification to ensure the longevity of the new emir's term.¹¹¹ When one also adds his education in Islamic sciences to the list of his qualifications, Al-Baghdadi became the ideal candidate for ISI which was emphasizing its Iraqi identity with an increasingly distinguishable apocalyptic tone and strong claims to statehood, including the ultimate aim of establishing an Islamic caliphate.

After his release from Camp Bucca in December 2004, either because of his insignificance for the Salafi-jihadi movements or a lack of intelligence about him, it took only five years for him to become the new emir of ISI with the title of the "*amir Al-mumineen*", asking all Muslims' loyalty and allegiance.¹¹² This incredible career move, although also raising suspicions about him, demonstrated that someone with absolutely no role inside the Salafi-jihadi groups in Afghanistan and with a negligible role in the

¹⁰⁹ Hosken, *Empire of Fear: Inside the Islamic State*. p.168

¹¹⁰ Hassan and Weiss. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. p.120

¹¹¹ *Ibid*

¹¹² Lister C., *The Syrian Jihad*. p. 120

insurgency in Iraq during the invasion and post invasion years could rise to prominence in a short period of time and become the leader of the biggest Salafi-jihadi group in Iraq, and later the biggest and richest Salafi-jihadi group in the world. In this sense, Al-Baghdadi is a curious as well as striking example of incredible upward mobility inside the Salafi-jihadi movements.



4. The Roots of ISIS' Ideology

“It is better for those who have the intention to begin a jihadi action and are also lenient, to sit in their homes”

Abu Bakr Naji

There are various differences among Salafi-jihadi groups in terms of their ideology and operational methods; and as far as the groups affiliated at least at some point with the Al-Qaeda are concerned, one may talk about two main factions and lines of thought: the Bin Laden and Al-Zarqawi schools. Both schools are anchored in the Salafi-jihadi tradition; however, they differ greatly in terms of relations with other Muslims, the concept of enemy and the methods and limits of war. The Bin Laden school which dominated the Al-Qaeda's core structure believes that the jihad must be focused on the “far enemy” that basically alludes to the “non-Muslim invaders” who have been controlling Muslim lands directly or indirectly for decades. This approach advises patience and gradual transformation from an organization (*tandhim*) to the caliphate.¹¹³ In other words, Bin Laden advocated not to rush for declaration of a state or a caliphate, and to wait for the conditions to become ripe. His main target had been foreigners and Western – mainly US- interests in the Middle East due to his conviction that if the far enemy is defeated the enemies within cannot survive for a long time; therefore, their defeat would automatically bring the end of the local tyrants. It is therefore not a coincidence that Al-Qaeda's first series of attacks in the 1990's were against the American soldiers in Yemen, World Trade Center in New York, and US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

The Al-Zarqawi school, on the other hand, gave the priority to the near enemy, which would gain different meanings over time as the Salafi-jihadi groups went through ideological and geographical transformation. One should first note here that Al-Zarqawi's concept of near enemy is different from the one of Azzam's in that Azzam was basically an anti-colonialist whose concept of near enemy was limited in scope and shaped by the

¹¹³ Byman D., *Al Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p.169.

physical invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets. Al-Zarqawi's concept of near enemy was however influenced highly by his bitter experience in a Jordanian prison, Al-Suwaqa, and his hatred toward Jordanian officials. This is probably why by near enemy he initially meant the rulers of the Muslim lands whom Al-Zarqawi saw as tyrants and oppressors whose shady dealings with the Western powers destroyed the Muslim countries. So he made an open enemy out of Muslim rulers and thought one should first fight against them to liberate people from injustice and oppression. This is of course an idealistic reading of what Al-Zarqawi had in mind when he formulated the concept of the near enemy. However, it is quite obvious that his hatred and desire for revenge were the key instincts in his prioritization of the rulers of Muslim lands, starting from the King of Jordan. His concept of the near enemy had gone through various transformations over time, and the battleground in which Al-Zarqawi operated played a crucial role in this transformation. When Al-Zarqawi moved to Iraq in 2003, his concept started to gain new meanings; and this period witnessed intensification of attacks against the Shiites who were considered as "*rafidha*," (rejectionists) a derogatory term referring to the Shiites for their rejection of Caliph Abu Bakr, Omar and Osman as legitimate successors to the Prophet Muhammad. His hatred toward the Shiites probably dates back to his years in Afghanistan; however, Iraq gave him a suitable ground to further his sectarian agenda. As will be discussed later, sectarianism was also an effective tool to create chaos which the Al-Zarqawi school saw as a preliminary step to the statehood and caliphate. Sectarianism has had repercussions all over the Islamic world, and it was also a handy tactic to mobilize people to fight. Sectarian fervor has been high among Shiites, and the War in Iraq triggered a similar kind of fervor among the Sunnis. US' preferential attitudes towards the Shiites, Saddam's identification with the Sunnis, and the whole debaathification process created dissent and disenfranchisement among the Sunnis which again made sectarianism an efficient way of recruitment and support for the Salafi-jihadis. Hence, Iraq transformed Al-Zarqawi's concept of near enemy and introduced a strong sectarian component to it whereby Shiites were added to the list of near enemies. Syria brought new dimensions to the concept of the near enemy understood by the Al-Zarqawi school, and Sunni Muslims who reject the authority of ISI/ISIS were also deemed as near enemies. The Al-Zarqawi school legitimized the killings of Shiites as they were considered as rafidah, but also Sunnis through

excommunicating or calling them collaterals. As mentioned earlier, Al-Zarqawi believed that collateral killing of Muslims is permissible, and even legitimized the killing of women and children based on this understanding. This understanding was inherited by ISIS which prioritized the fight against the Syrian insurgents, i.e. predominantly Sunnis. Therefore, one should seek ISIS' indiscriminate killing and targeting of Muslims in Al-Zarqawi's understanding of the near enemy, which not only included the Shiites but also the Sunnis who do not submit to ISIS.

The speed of transformation from an armed organization into a state or caliphate was another point of difference between the two approaches. Bin Laden's gradual approach was not good enough for those who employed Al-Zarqawi's approach, which thought the whole process towards the statehood could be accelerated and reached by meeting minimum requirements. This approach, influenced deeply by the messianic reading of the world, thought that an Islamic state should be declared if they control enough people and territory where they set the rules of the game. The declaration of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq in 2006 created tensions between the two schools, and the Al-Qaeda Core never willingly approved the declaration because Ben Laden thought the conditions were still immature for the establishment of an Islamic State. The ISI, on the other hand, argued that they controlled a territory larger than the Islamic State established by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina; and in this sense they should be recognized as a state.¹¹⁴

ISIS is the direct successor of the Al-Zarqawi school both ideologically and methodologically. The tenets of Al-Zarqawi's ideology shaped ISIS' terror strategy and turned the group into an indiscriminate killing machine. The ideological division between the two schools became the basis for violent clashes between ISIS and Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, Jabhat Al-Nusra; and the division which started at the ideological level first led to partition and consequently triggered protracted conflict between the two groups. In order to grasp ISIS' terror strategy, positioning of itself in the grand scheme of things and the underlying factors that caused ISIS-Al-Nusra clashes, one should go deep into ISIS' ideology by seeking its roots in the existing literature as well as by understanding key

¹¹⁴منظرو داعش يدافعون عن شرعية خلافة البغدادي: بوبع كالخلفاء الراشدين ودولته أكبر من دولة النبي بالمدينة¹¹⁴ CNN.21 July 2014. <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/07/21/isis-baghdadi-responds>

concepts that shaped ISIS' terror strategy and its relations with other parties. An invaluable source that inspired ISIS, as well as other Salafi-jihadis, is an understudied book called the *Management of Savagery (Idarat Al-Tawahhush)* by one Abu Bakr Naji, who wrote the roadmap to statehood by using unconventional and controversial strategies, most of which were later employed by ISIS. In addition to the *Management of Savagery*, three concepts bear utmost importance to make sense of ISIS' terror strategy: messianism, takfir and caliphate. ISIS diverged from other Salafi-jihadis due to its extensive use of takfir, its messianic reading of Islam and narrow understanding of the caliphate. These three concepts have had strong implications for ISIS' worldview and strategy.

This chapter will decode the ideological features of ISIS by analyzing four key concepts. The first part will attempt to decipher ISIS' concept of chaos by examining an influential book, *Management of Savagery*, by Abu Bakr Naji. The book is frequently quoted by the ideologues of the group, and the violent strategy it offers finds echoes in ISIS' terror strategy. The next part will delve into the concept of takfirism, the practice of excommunicating other Muslims, which ISIS use to get a license for killing rivals who are Muslims. ISIS has strong messianic beliefs that shape the group's comprehension of the world and its strategies. Therefore, the third part will explore the messianic roots of the ISIS phenomenon, while also elaborating on the messianic component in ISIS' terror strategy. The last part will explain how central the concept of the caliphate is to ISIS ideology and what the caliphate entails as an endgame for the ISIS enterprise.

4.1. Management of Savagery: How It Shaped ISIS' Terror Strategy

While Bin Laden attached importance to popular support to expand the Salafi-jihadi movement and ultimately establish the caliphate, Al-Zarqawi did not heed the public opinion as much and thought that the caliphate could be imposed from the top down. To achieve this, local rulers must first be ousted and the Shiites, who collaborate with the Americans to suppress the Sunnis, must be eliminated. This of course meant deepening the political and sectarian divides in the region that would further increase the intensity of the

chaos in the Middle East. As much as it sounds alarming, chaos is something that could be exploited by actors who have the ability and preparation to operate better under chaotic conditions. In other words, chaos is a desirable condition for certain groups who saw it as an opportunity to fight enemies that are disproportionately stronger. For ISIS, chaos is the perfect breeding ground; and one could argue that there is a two-way correlation between ISIS and the concept of chaos in that ISIS became what it is today due to the chaos in Syria and Iraq while contributing highly to the already chaotic region. For ISIS, therefore, chaos brings opportunities and introduces a fertile ground on which it establishes its terror and expansionist strategy. This is of course not unique to ISIS but many VNSAs operate more comfortably than the states in times of chaos and instability. However, chaos is not only tactically but also ideologically central to ISIS' worldview, and an understudied work which is well-known in Salafi-jihadi circles has unique influence over ISIS' terror strategy.

The Management of Savagery by one Abu Bakr Naji, which was distributed online in 2004, is arguably the most influential work that shaped ISIS' terror strategy; therefore, an invaluable source to make sense of ISIS' current and future operations. One can find striking parallels between what the book sets as the roadmap towards the caliphate and the track record of ISIS from its days in Iraq up until now. The propaganda journal of ISIS, Dabiq, frequently uses concepts, ideas and terms, apparently inspired by Naji; and directly borrows terms such as *tamkin* from the Management of Savagery. The 268-page book written by pseudonym Abu Bakr Naji explains how chaos, violence and savagery should be benefited from to reach the ultimate aim of establishing an Islamic State. The book talks in detail about the pre-Islamic State period which, according to him, is characterized by savagery which is not necessarily bad for the Salafi-jihadi movements with a state project. Although we do not know who the real Naji is, there are claims that his real name is Muhammad Hassan Halil Al-Hukaim, an Egyptian who at one point served as Al-Qaeda's foreign relations officer; and Al-Zawahiri personally praised him and his work.¹¹⁵ The book's full title is "The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Ummah Will Pass." Naji explains what he means by the management of savagery:

¹¹⁵Masire H. إدارة التوحش.. والملاذات الأمانة للإرهاب من نظام الأسد إلى إمارة داعش! *Al Arabiya Institute for Studies*. 26 May 2014. <http://bit.ly/1WPBFG>

“when the large states or empires fell — whether they were Islamic or non-Islamic — and a state did not come into being which was equal in power or comparable to the previous state in its ability to control the lands and regions of that state which collapsed, the regions and sectors of this state became, according to human nature, subservient to what is called “administrations of savagery.”” Therefore, the management of savagery is defined very succinctly as the management of savage chaos!! As for a detailed definition, it differs according to the goals and nature of the individuals in the administration. If we picture its initial form, we find that it consists of the management of peoples’ needs with regard to the provision of food and medical treatment, preservation of security and justice among the people who live in the regions of savagery, securing the borders by means of groups that deter anyone who tries to assault the regions of savagery, as well as setting up defensive fortifications.”¹¹⁶

As a matter of fact, Naji makes clear that what he has in mind as savagery is one step further than simple chaos or in his words savagery is more “nebulous than chaos.”¹¹⁷ He describes the times and regions after the fall of large states and empires as times and regions of savagery which, if an apt strategy is followed, brings opportunities for the Salafi-jihadi movements. In giving details about this era, Naji uses pre-Taliban Afghanistan as an example:

“Before its submission to the administration, the region of savagery will be in a situation resembling the situation of Afghanistan before the control of the Taliban, a region submitting to the law of the jungle in its primitive form, whose good people and even the wise among the evildoers yearn for someone to manage this savagery. They even accept any organization, regardless of whether it is made up of good or evil people. However, if the evil people manage this savagery, it is possible that this region will become even more barbarous!”¹¹⁸

People, according to Naji seek saviors from this era of savagery, and the Salafi-jihadis should take this opportunity and fill the vacuum by playing smart and operating under the conditions of chaos. In other words, it must be the Salafi-jihadis who manage this savagery by:

- Spreading internal security
- Providing food and medical treatment
- Securing the region of savagery from the invasions of enemies

¹¹⁶Naji, Abu Baker. *إدارة التوحش: أخطر مرحلة ستمر بها الأمة*. p. 11 (for the quotations translation by William McCants was used)

¹¹⁷ ibid

¹¹⁸ ibid

- *Establishing Sharia justice among the people who live in the regions of savagery*
- *Raising the level of belief and combat efficiency during the training of the youth of the region of savagery and establishing a fighting society at all levels and among all individuals by making them aware of its importance.*
- *Working for the spread of Sharia science (putting the most important aspects before those of lesser importance) and worldly science (putting the most important aspects before those of lesser importance).*
- *Dissemination of spies and seeking to complete the construction of a minimal intelligence agency.*
- *Uniting the hearts of the world's people by means of money and uniting the world through Sharia governance and (compliance with) rules which are publicly observed, at least by those in the administration.*
- *Deterring the hypocrites with proof and other means and forcing them to repress and conceal their hypocrisy, to hide their discouraged opinions, and to comply with those in authority until their evil is put in check.*
- *Progressing until it is possible to expand and attack the enemies in order to repel them, plunder their money, and place them in a constant state of apprehension and (make them) desire reconciliation.*
- *Establishing coalitions with those with whom coalitions are permitted, those who have not given complete allegiance to the administration.*¹¹⁹

Naji therefore proposes a proto-state which would operate in areas ranging from security to education, economy, politics and social services. These are preparations before the declaration of a state to convince people that there is a way out of savagery, and it is through the Salafi-jihadis. This period in ISIS' chronology coincides with the era before the capture of Mosul and declaration of the so-called caliphate. In this period, ISIS boosted internal security, provided social services to the local people, established religious courts and da'wah offices to proselytize the locals, expanded its economic activities by selling the grain harvests and oil, formed a spy network to infiltrate their rivals including the insurgents, used money to recruit people from Syria and abroad, and established coalitions with local tribes as well as modus vivendi with the Assad regime. One could therefore see the strong imprint of Naji in the ISIS' expansion era which would be "a bridge to the Islamic State which has been awaited since the fall of the caliphate."¹²⁰

According to Naji, living under savagery is more preferable than living under the rule of infidels; and because of this, the Salafi-jihadis should organize attacks wherever

¹¹⁹ *ibid*, pp.11-12

¹²⁰ *ibid*. p. 4

possible to create chaos and a power vacuum that would usher in the era of savagery. The chaos and terror would divert the attention of super powers, especially the US, towards the region of savagery and force the US to interfere directly. Here Naji sets the goals for the Salafi-jihadis:

“The first goal: Destroy a large part of the respect for America and spread confidence in the souls of Muslims by means of:

(1) Reveal the deceptive media to be a power without force.

(2) Force America to abandon its war against Islam by proxy and force it to attack directly so that the noble ones among the masses and a few of the noble ones among the armies of apostasy will see that their fear of deposing the regimes because America is their protector is misplaced and that when they depose the regimes, they are capable of opposing America if it interferes.

The second goal: Replace the human casualties sustained by the renewal movement during the past thirty years by means of the human aid that will probably come for two reasons:

(1) Being dazzled by the operations which will be undertaken in opposition to America.

(2) Anger over the obvious, direct American interference in the Islamic world, such that that anger compounds the previous anger against America's support for the Zionist entity. It also transforms the suppressed anger toward the regimes of apostasy and tyranny into a positive anger. Human aid for the renewal movement will not dry up, especially when heedless people among the masses and they are the majority discover the truth of the collaboration of these regimes with the enemies of the Ummah to such an extent that no deceptive veil will be of use and no pretext will remain for any claimant to the Islam of these regimes and their like.

The third goal: Work to expose the weakness of America's centralized power by pushing it to abandon the media psychological war and the war by proxy until it fights directly. As a result, the apostates among all of the sects and groups and even Americans themselves will see that the remoteness of the primary center from the peripheries is a major factor contributing to the possible outbreak of chaos and savagery.”¹²¹

It is quite revealing that pulling the United States into war in Syria and Iraq was part of the plan according to which ISIS, apparently inspired by Naji, wanted the US to become involved in the current turmoil in Iraq and Syria so that ISIS could attack and exhaust the US and its allies in a protracted conflict. ISIS is after a war of attrition which would not only damage the US militarily but also disintegrate its public image in the Islamic world by revealing its vulnerabilities. This would in turn motivate the Muslims to fight against the US when they saw that the US could be beaten. Naji uses many examples from the Soviet-

¹²¹ Ibid. pp. 9-10

Afghan War in which the Soviets were pulled into chaos and the mujahedeen beat them with inferior weapons and less manpower.

As for the place that should be chosen as the center of Salafi-jihadi activity and management of savagery, Naji gives a list of properties all of which indeed correspond to the conditions in Iraq and Syria:

“-The presence of geographical depth and topography permits, in each separate state, the establishment of regions in it which are managed by the regime of the administration of savagery.

- The weakness of the ruling regime and the weakness of the centralization of its power in the peripheries of the borders of its state and sometimes in internal regions, particularly those that are overcrowded.

- The presence of jihadi, Islamic expansion being propagated in these regions.

- The nature of the people in these regions. This is a matter in which God has given preference to one place over another.

- Likewise, the distribution of weapons by people who are in those regions.”¹²²

An ideal place for the management of savagery must retain geographical properties that are prone to regionalism. As in Iraq and Syria, pockets of territory that are out of control of the current administration must be controlled by the Salafi-jihadis to implement their administration of savagery. Another important aspect is the lack of state authority; failed states like Iraq and Syria are ideal spots for expansion and experimentation of the administration of savagery. Therefore, ISIS' expansion in Iraq and Syria is obviously not a coincidence, but rather was a part of the plan. Iraq may be the birth place of the ISI/ISIS line; however, its expansion towards Syria, where chaos and violence has been prevailing, was a well-planned strategy by ISIS. The weakness of central government in Syria gave ISIS the opportunity to operate relatively easily in areas, mostly carved from the insurgents, and run a state-like structure. As mentioned earlier, Syria is also a country where there was a Salafi-jihadi presence even before the start of the insurgency. Although Salafi-jihadism was not a strong trend among Syrians, there had always been groups linked with the idea that previously fought in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, the Assad regime's dealings with the Salafi-jihadis during the years of the Iraq invasion also contributed to the Salafi-jihadi presence in Syria as some of the veterans returned to Syria either after the beginning of the

¹²² *ibid.* p. 38

insurgency or due to their disillusionment during the Sahwa years. What Naji meant by “the nature of the people” may be understood in several ways; but his later discussions in the book point to local people’s understanding of and relations with Islam that constructs people’s nature with regard to Salafi-jihadism. Naji also suggests that certain peoples and regions are more prone to fighting, resistance and armed struggle as opposed to being conformist and peaceful in nature. In this categorization, however, one cannot single out Syria as the ideal place for Naji’s notorious utopia as it is well known for its long and rich history of civilization, extensive networks of trade, highly educated civilians and interaction with the outside world. This probably explains why ISIS has not so far established a societal backing for itself in Syria and lacks popular support despite the fear its spreads and the Syrians’ widespread feeling of abandonment by the Islamic world and the West. And lastly, the level of armament in a given territory is quite important for the Salafi-jihadi activity as the armament itself furthers the state of chaos and opens venues for Salafi-jihadi intervention.

The places which possess the above mentioned properties would likely have security failures and vacuums of power to be exploited. The failures of the authorities to preserve law and order would create a society in which the “rules of the jungle” are in power. People living in such a society would seek saviors who would manage the chaos (savagery, in Naji’s words) and offer services and security. According to Naji, under these extraordinary circumstances, people would not care whether the savior is good or bad; and just support whoever brings order to the society.¹²³

For Naji, the path to salvation of the ummah has three main stages: the stage of power of vexation and exhaustion, the stage of the management of savagery and the stage of establishing the state. The first stage aims to create chaos and savagery in different regions and lays the groundwork for the next stage. In other words, this stage tries to sow chaos and savagery in prioritized places that would later be managed by the Salafi-jihadis. This stage involves exhausting and weakening the enemy’s combatant force and morale with key operations, attracting young recruits to the ranks by undertaking “qualitative

¹²³ Ibid. p.11

operations”, dislodging the selected area from the control of the central authority, and preparing the army of vexation physically and psychologically with drills and on-site experience. The second stage would come only after the army of vexation achieves its goals in the first stage and creates a chaos to be administered. This stage has, in Naji’s own words, twelve main goals to achieve:

- 1- *Spreading internal security and preserving it in every region that is managed*
- 2- *Providing food and medical treatment*
- 3- *Securing the region of savagery from the invasions of enemies by setting up defensive fortifications and developing fighting capacities*
- 4- *Establishing Sharia justice among the people who live in the regions of savagery*
- 5- *Raising the level of faith and combat efficiency during the training of the youth of the region of savagery and establishing a fighting society at all levels and among all individuals by means of making them aware of its importance. But it must be made clear that it is an obligatory duty, which does not mean that every individual member of society must practice fighting; rather, only a part or portion of the fighting ranks (must practice it) in the form which the society knows best and needs.*
- 6- *Working for the spread of legal, Sharia science (putting the most important aspects before those of lesser importance) and worldly science (putting the most important aspects before those of lesser importance).*
- 7- *Disseminating spies and seeking to complete the construction of a minimal intelligence agency.*
- 8- *Uniting the hearts of the people by means of money and uniting the world by Sharia governance and (compliance with) rules which are at least exemplified by individuals in the administration.*
- 9- *Detering the hypocrites with proof and other means and forcing them to repress and conceal their hypocrisy, to hide their discouraged opinions, and to comply with those in authority until their evil is put in check.*
- 10- *Working until it is possible to expand and attack the enemies in order to repel them, plunder their money, and place them in a constant state of apprehension and desire for reconciliation.*
- 11- *Establishing coalitions with those with whom coalitions are permitted, those who have not given complete allegiance to the administration.*
- 12- *To these we add a future goal, which is the advancement of managerial groups toward the attainment of the “power of establishment” and readiness for plucking the fruit (of their efforts) and establishing the state.¹²⁴*

The second stage like the first stage is a preparation for the next stage and aims to establish a proto-state which gains mastery in the art of different aspects of administration. In this

¹²⁴Ibid. pp. 16-18

state, the proto-state body offers state-like services to the people, ameliorates security conditions, establishes social and religious institutions, begins intelligence gathering, forms alliances and coalitions to consolidate its power and spreads its understanding of religious codes. In Syria, the second stage covers the time period between Al-Baghdadi's entrance to Syria and the declaration of the ISIS caliphate. During this period ISIS achieved almost all goals listed by Naji in his book, and started its active media campaign as also recommended by Naji. ISIS formed media teams to spread its messages to the world, to attract new recruits, to pursue propaganda campaigns against enemies and to do PR work for the group. The third stage came only after the goals of the second stage were achieved, and declaration of the ISIS caliphate followed suit. ISIS therefore had a clear-cut plan to statehood and caliphate and advanced stage by stage to reach its final goal. In other words, ISIS mostly followed the roadmap drawn by Naji in his book, the *Management of Savagery*, and put Naji's theoretical work into practice.

The book discusses at length military strategies that Salafi-jihadis should employ to achieve statehood. Under the section "Using the time-tested principles of military combat", Naji takes lessons from previous failures of the Salafi-jihadi groups and attempts to create a list of time-tested principles which should guide Salafi-jihadis' strategy of war. To use Salafi-jihadi forces as efficiently as possible, Naji mentions the following principles: "If regular armies concentrate in one place they lose control. Conversely, if they spread out, they lose effectiveness"¹²⁵; "Strike with your striking force multiple times and with the maximum power you possess in the most locations of the enemy"¹²⁶; "The most likely way to defeat the strongest enemy militarily is to drain it militarily and economically."¹²⁷ This section gives clues about ISIS' current military strategy and explains the main tactics employed by the group.

The next section entitled "Using Violence" contains the author's understanding of the use of violence in different stages and puts violence at the epicenter of the Salafi-jihadi strategy of war. Naji considers "leniency" as an abhorrent property for Salafi-jihadis as he

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 28

¹²⁶ Ibid. p. 29

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 30

thinks leniency is one of the primary reasons for the failure of jihad. Harshness, on the other hand, would make enemies think “one thousand times before attacking”¹²⁸ In other words, Naji sees harshness as a strong deterrent against enemy attacks, sending enemies the message that their attacks would be reciprocated with harshness. Here he praises the Abbasids’ use of violence and argues that one of the reasons for the success of the Abbasids was their violent strategy. Naji believes that we are now in the age of apostasy similar to the one after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and violence should be used as a method as it was used by the companions of the Prophet after his death to suppress the apostates. He advises to those who avoid violence to stay in their homes as they could be of no benefit to the mujahedeen. In one of his most controversial arguments, Naji writes that one could target women and children if there is a greater benefit in targeting them, i.e. deterring the enemy from doing the same.¹²⁹

Naji believes that politics should be based on self-interest and expects leaders to act accordingly; while he values cooperation with tribes and advocates that strong tribal ties should be exploited for the benefit of the mujahedeen. He argues that tribal ties are difficult to remove and actually can work for the benefit of the mujahedeen if used properly. Hence, Naji suggests working with the tribes to give them a direction rather than fighting against them to abolish their tribal system. He even sounds quite forgiving by his own standards towards tribal leaders who are “among the primary people of unbelief or the people of apostasy” and prefers winning their hearts rather than pushing them out or killing them.¹³⁰ ISI would see the logic behind this suggestion only a few years later when the Sahwa Councils started to fight against ISI which proved to be a major blow to the group.

In the next section, Naji highlights the importance of money in pursuing the Salafi-jihadi goals. He says that although their fight is not an economic, political, or social battle; they still “must not forget that part of sharia politics is to address those who have weak souls among the different classes of people with the promise of reclaiming our money and

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 31

¹²⁹ Ibid. p. 98

¹³⁰ Ibid. p. 48

our rights, or rather plundering the money of God which evil people have taken.”¹³¹ He therefore believes that people with “weak souls” can be attracted to work with them through promise of financial compensation and rewards. This, we would see in ISIS’ advent in both Syria and Iraq, has been one of the motivations of locals especially when they join ISIS as they offer higher salaries than other armed groups and “worldly gains” including money, property and women are among ISIS’ points of attraction for some of its militants.

Al-Zarqawi as well as his successors in ISI and ISIS tried very hard to create the state of chaos and savagery as put forward by Abu Bakr Naji in his book, the Management of Savagery. In other words, they accelerated an apocalyptic process that would realize the establishment of a caliphate by increasing the level of violence and deepening the state of chaos in Syria and Iraq. While ISIS employed a bloody strategy of terror by resorting to violence and the spread of fear; its pornography of violence gave it a disproportionate media appearance and raised it to a celebrity status albeit in a notorious way.¹³² After reading the Management of Savagery and comparing the strategy it delineates with the one employed by ISI and ISIS, one cannot but see its heavy influence over the decision makers that shaped ISIS’ strategy of terror. The book which has been widely read by Salafi-jihadi groups from Somalia to Saudi Arabia and Northern Africa¹³³; made a Machiavellian reading of Salafi-jihadism by propagating violence as an efficient means of ensuring subservience and domination. The book apparently broke with the mainstream Islamic law on war, but its clear-cut strategy that explains every single stage in detail made sense in the minds of ISIS’ masterminds. ISIS, therefore, did not create its strategy of terror from scratch, but utilized many tactics elaborated by Abu Bakr Naji in the Management of Savagery.

4.2.Messianic Expectations and ISIS’ Purported Role in Apocalyptic Events

¹³¹ Ibid. p. 50

¹³² Stern, J., Berger, J.M. *In ISIS: The State of Terror*. p. 234

¹³³ McCants, W. (2015) *The ISIS Apocalypse*.p. 84

As mentioned earlier, messianism and apocalyptic thinking have a strong influence over ISIS' mindset, its approach to war, and the cosmic value it attributes to itself. ISIS differs greatly from most of the mainstream Islamic groups and even from the mainstream Al-Qaeda ideology due to these messianic elements in its ideology. Unlike most of the other Islamic groups, one can find strong messianic elements in both their rhetoric and actions. ISIS establishes a strong connection between the coming of the Mahdi (i.e. Islamic Messiah) and the pervasion of chaos in the world, and attributes itself a divine duty to accelerate the coming of the Mahdi through human intervention by spreading violence, mischief and chaos similar to some other messianic movements from other religions such as the Sabbatean Movement in the 17th century.¹³⁴

In a nutshell, messianism denotes to the expectancy that “time process will bring about a major change for the better, leading either to the restoration of a past golden age or to the creation of a new one.”¹³⁵ Messianism both as an ideology and movement flourishes in times of frustration and suffering and gives its followers motivation and devotion that a divinely appointed one will deliver people from suppression and usher in a new era of justice. Messianism occupies a central place in both Judaism and Christianity; however, except for the Shi'ite messianism, it has never been a strong or mainstream trend and ideology in Islam. Unlike Shi'ism, Sunnis never saw messianism as an essential part of Islam. Although Islam shares many beliefs of the two Abrahamic religions, “the Qur'an repudiates the main components of the idea of messianism, namely, the concept of the Messiah as well as the notion of redemption, intercession, and a charismatic personality or community having more than human powers or special prerogatives.”¹³⁶ The mention of a messianic figure who will deliver people from chaos is not centrally located in Islamic literature, and the eschatological indication of a Messiah/Mahdi figure is highly contested. Nevertheless, ISIS and its predecessors widely quote two sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and position themselves at the center of the scenarios depicted by these sayings. According to one hadith, the Prophet is reported to have said: “If you see the black

¹³⁴ See Scholem, G. *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) and Cohn, N. *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957)

¹³⁵ Hassan, R. “Messianism and Islam” in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Volume 22, No. 2, Spring 1985, pp. 261-262

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 263

banners coming from Khorasan go to them immediately, even if you must crawl over ice, because indeed amongst them is the Caliph, Al Mahdi.”

ISIS spreads the claim that they are the bearers of the black banner, and it is on every single Muslim to submit allegiance to the caliph Ibrahim, a.k.a. Al-Baghdadi. As William McCants argues in his excellently written book, there are strong similarities between the rhetoric that ISIS wants to create out of this hadith and the Abbasid Revolution. Here, one should be reminded of Naji’s extensive use of the Abbasids and his praise of Abbasid strategy and beliefs as a guide for the Salafi-jihadis. There are many similarities between the messianism of ISIS and the Abbasids; but a few of them prominently stand out. Use of the term “state” to describe the political structure they created, symbolism of colors and figures, apocalyptic propaganda, uprisings initiated in Syria and Iraq and the claims to descent from the family of the Prophet Muhammad are some of the main similarities. The Abbasids, similar to what ISIS has been doing, overthrew and replaced the central authority and actively used apocalyptic elements and messages to pursue their goals and mobilize people.¹³⁷

The other hadith widely used by ISIS in its official publications explains the significance of the area that the group operates, namely Syria.

“The Last Hour will not come until the Romans land at al-A'maq or in Dabiq in north of Aleppo. An army consisting of the best (soldiers) of the people on Earth at that time will come from Medina (to oppose them). When they arrange themselves in ranks, the Romans will say: Do not stand between us and those (Muslims) who took prisoners from among us. Let us fight them. The Muslims will say: Nay, by Allah, we shall never turn aside from you and from our brethren so that you may fight them. They will then fight and a third (part) of the army, whom Allah will never forgive, will run away. A third (part of the army), which will be constituted of excellent martyrs in Allah's eyes, would be killed. The third who will never be put on trial will win and they will be the conquerors of Constantinople.”

Dabiq which is a geopolitically insignificant town in Aleppo near the Turkish border has always had a special place for the jihadis coming from Al-Zarqawi’s school of thought. For ISIS, the town is the location of a key apocalyptic war between Muslims and infidels; and ISIS prioritized the capture of Dabiq and took over the town in the summer of 2014 from

¹³⁷ McCants, W. (2015) *The ISIS Apocalypse*. p.27

the Syrian insurgents. Although ISIS did not excessively mention Dabiq before 2014, the spokesperson of ISIS said that Dabiq is promised to the jihadis, and the group named their English-language journal, which was first published in July 2014, Dabiq. It should also be noted that ISIS named their Turkish-language journal Konstantiniyye, another city mentioned in the hadith quoted above. ISIS continues to employ extensive use of symbolism to both seek messianic legitimacy and motivate its militants by portraying themselves as the group realizing the apocalyptic prophecies of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Dabiq Journal is the most important publication of ISIS which it has been using to disseminate its propaganda and publicize its activities. First published right after the capture of Mosul, ISIS produced Dabiq bimonthly during 2014 and 2015; however, the group started to publish it every three months in 2016. Each issue is around 60 pages and designed professionally with high definition photos and catchy titles. In addition to its propagandistic articles, the journal is also a major outlet to encourage new recruits and claim responsibility for sensational operations such as the downing of the Russian plane in Sinai, beheadings of two Japanese journalists and attacks in Belgium. Dabiq has dedicated an entire section in every Issue to talk about and declare its responsibility behind the terrorist attacks that occur around the world. In its latest issue, for example, Dabiq claims responsibility for the attacks that took place in France, Germany, Bangladesh, and Egypt. At the beginning of the report, the following is stated: “As the soldiers of the Caliphate continue waging war on the forces of kufr, we take a glimpse at a number of recent operations conducted by the mujahidin of the Islamic State that have succeeded in expanding the territory of the Caliphate, or terrorizing, massacring, and humiliating the enemies of Allah. These operations are merely a selection of the numerous operations that the Islamic State has conducted on various fronts across many regions over the course of the last few months”¹³⁸ ISIS also publishes a Turkish version of the journal that is specifically designed for the Turkish audience. Five issues of Konstantiniyye, the historic name of Istanbul, have so far been published. The journal contains articles threatening the Turkish government, and calls Turkish citizens to join ISIS by using references to *Hijrah*, the Prophet Muhammad’s and early Muslims’ migration from Mecca to Medina.

¹³⁸ Dabiq Issue 15, p.40.

Underlining the significance of Dabiq in ISIS' eschatology, the journal quotes the following words of Al-Zarqawi on the second page of every single issue: "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify –by Allah's permission –until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq". The quote not only highlights the continuity of the Salafi-jihadi tradition embodied by ISI/ISIS, its messianic tone also gives ideas about ISIS' ideology. Dabiq is significant because it will be, according to ISIS, the place where the events of Al-Malhamah Al-Kubra(The Grand Battle) against the crusaders will take place.¹³⁹The term "Al-Malhamah Al-Kubra" is another notion which has been mentioned throughout the magazine quite often, which keeps on referring to the Hour Approach (End of Times). The journal reads: "I have no doubt that this state, which has gathered the bulk of the muhājirīn in Shām and has become the largest collection of muhājirīn in the world, is a marvel of history that has only come about to pave the way for al-Malhamah al-Kubrā (the grand battle prior to the Hour)."¹⁴⁰

The magazine has a mixture of religious apocalyptic statements to attack the 'enemies'. In an article written under the title of: "The Rafidah': From Ibn Saba' to the Dajjal", ISIS seeks to compare how the Rafidah' (used to refer to the Shi'ites) describe and view their Mahdi and how the Dajjal is described in the Sunnah. "These fabricated narrations falsely attributed to Ahlul-Bayt actually describe the Dajjāl – the "Messiah" of the Jews The Rāfidah await the Jewish Dajjāl, whom they plot to support alongside the Jews against the Muslims"¹⁴¹. The magazine concludes that this is a sign of the Approach of the Final Hour and that Rafidahs are apostates who should be killed wherever they are to be found. They extensively refer throughout the article to the End of Times and the arrival of the false Messiah/Anti-Christ. ISIS comes across this matter in another issue whereby they restate the following: "The closer the Hour approaches, the more the Rāfidah fall in line with the Jews in preparation for the appearance of this awaited evil leader. Upon

¹³⁹ Dabiq Issue 3, p.15.

¹⁴⁰ Dabiq Issue 3, p.6.

¹⁴¹ Dabiq Issue 13, p.45.

reading the Rāfidī account of the “Mahdī,” it becomes clear that he is none other than the Dajjāl.”¹⁴²

Even by merely analyzing Dabiq, one can see strong messianic and apocalyptic scenarios with ISIS positioning itself at the center. ISIS believes the end of time is approaching and there will be a great battle between the armies of the anti-Christ and the armies of Islam which ISIS has been forming. ISIS also gives superior attributes to its armies as they are the “best soldiers on earth” as mentioned in the hadith quoted above. In other words, ISIS believes it is a part of a greater plan regarding the last-day set by Allah and predicted by the Prophet; therefore, they attribute to themselves a divine role in fulfilling the prophecies about the coming of this event. These apocalyptic ideas and the group’s end-time fixation distinguished ISIS from many other Salafi-jihadis, including Al-Qaeda, as McCants puts it: “They stir messianic fervor rather than suppress it. They want God’s kingdom now rather than later. This is not Bin Laden’s jihad.”¹⁴³ Even the groups’ efforts to pull big powers into the Islamic lands militarily, as suggested by Abu Bakr Naji in the *Management of Savagery*, has apocalyptic tones in the sense that ISIS tries to accelerate the prophecy of the grand battle centered in Dabiq with human intervention.

Messianism and apocalyptic elements are an intrinsic part of ISIS’ ideology, and a convenient tool to mobilize and motivate existing militants and potential recruits. ISIS does not only legitimize its strategy of terror by attributing itself a divine role in apocalyptic scenarios but also lures people into the group with an offer to take part in these scenarios. ISIS’ messianism leaves no room for bystanders and forces people to take sides either with the army of the anti-Christ or the army of Islam. In the ISIS’ world of black and white, this choice is between paradise and hell. It is no surprise that those with messianic expectations who are seeking quick redemption have been among the potential recruits of ISIS; and messianism has been a major radicalizing force for the ISIS militants as it not only vindicates violence but also encourages it as a part of prophesized last-day happenings.

¹⁴² Dabiq Issue 11, p.16.

¹⁴³ “How ISIS Is An Apocalyptic Cult, And What That Means”, *Huffington Post*, 23 November 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/islamic-state-apocalyptic_us_564e7d04e4b0d4093a5722aa

Hence, messianism is crucial to understand ISIS' strategy of terror and its positioning of itself with regard to the Islamic as well as non-Islamic world.

4.3. License to Kill: Takfirism and Its Implications for ISIS' Military Strategy

Takfirism, together with strong Messianism, is one of the most distinctive elements of the ideology of ISIS. In its simplest form, takfir refers to the act of excommunication of a person or a group, pronouncing that the person or the group in question is no longer Muslim. Takfir has been heavily discussed by Islamic scholars throughout history; and there are strong divergences among scholars on the methods and reasons of the act of takfir. In the modern era, the term gained new scope and meaning, and some Salafi-jihadis have been using takfir to sanction violence against other Muslims. Mainstream Islam- even Most Salafis- reject the act of takfir as a doctrinal deviation; but it is still used by groups such as ISIS to legitimize killing of other Muslims. Takfir can be understood in two different forms. The first one is to consider one's actions and words as non-Islamic that amount to constitute a *kufir* (denial or rejection of Islamic rulings). Although these actions and words contain elements of *kufir*, it may not turn the person into a *murtad* (an apostate). The second one is more related with act of apostasy (*riddah*) rather than *kufir* as explained under the first form. *Riddah* is the rejection of Islam by a Muslim with actions and words; and takfir is pronouncing that person a non-Muslim after going delicately through the rulings of Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence).¹⁴⁴ According to the classical *fiqh*, the penalty for *riddah* is death. Ibn Taymiyyah, whom ISIS quotes widely, allocates a long discussion about the practice of takfir in his collection of fatwas, *Majmu Al-Fatawa*; however, his discussion is much more sophisticated and careful than ISIS' use of his fatwas.¹⁴⁵ A significant excerpt from Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwas is the following:

¹⁴⁴ For further discussion, See Ibn Othaymin, Mohammed. القول المفيد على كتاب التوحيد. (Dar al-Asima, 1995) Vol.2 , p.271.

¹⁴⁵ See Ibn Taymiyyah. مجموعة الفتاوى. (Dar Al-Wafa' Tiba' al-Nashr al-Tawzi', 1997).vol.1, p.81; Ibn Taymiyyah. Bughyat Al-Murtad بغية المرتد, (Medina: Maktabat Al-Ulum al-Hekam, 2001) p.345; Ibn Taymiyyah. مجموعة الفتاوى. vol.5 p.329.

*“It is not permitted to excommunicate another Muslim as a result of a sin or sins they may have committed, or for legitimate differences of opinion on issues about which Muslims (ahl al-qibla) disagree.”*¹⁴⁶

All major collections of sayings of the Prophet Muhammad affirm that the punishment is death; though some of them exempt women apostates from death.¹⁴⁷ In addition to the major hadith collections, many other well-known works discuss takfir with references to the sayings of the Prophet. For example, Sheikh al-Kulayni narrates a hadith from Ali ibn Ja`far who said, "I asked him about a Muslim who became Christian." He answered, "He should be killed and not be asked to seek forgiveness." Then I asked: "What about a Christian who becomes a Muslim and then turns away from Islam?" He replied, "He should be asked to seek forgiveness; so if he returns (to Islam, then okay), otherwise he should be killed."¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Sheikh al-Kulayni quotes a hadith from Muhammad bin Muslim who said, "I asked (Imam) Abu Ja`far (al-Bāqir) about the murtad." He said, "Whoever turns away from Islam and rejects what has been revealed to Muhammad after he had been a Muslim, then there is no repentance for him; rather it is obligatory to kill him; and his wife should separate from him, and his wealth should be distributed among his heirs."¹⁴⁹

Takfirism of ISIS, however, rejects the separation between the first and second form of kufr, and feels free to announce anyone or any group as apostates based on their “un-Islamic” words and actions. This of course gives, according to ISIS, the license to kill and sanctions killings of other Muslims and Muslim groups. Takfirism is a mentality and practice that shaped Al-Zarqawi’s views and was bequeathed to ISIS. The underlying idea behind Al-Zarqawi’s term of “near enemy” which includes the Shi’ites and Sunnis who refuse to pledge allegiance to ISIS is his takfirism. As mentioned before, the Al-Zarqawi line of thought, unlike Bin Laden, prioritized the fight against the near enemy, mostly Muslims, and takfirism offered him “religious” license to be able to kill other Muslims. ISIS’ takfirism preaches that the group cannot beat the far enemy without first crashing the

¹⁴⁶ Ibn Taymiyyah. *مجموعۃ الفتاوى*. Vol. 3, p. 86

¹⁴⁷ See Kitab Al-Qasama, *Sahih Muslim*, Chapter DCLXXIII, Numbers 4152-4155, pp. 898-900.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Kulayni, M., *فروع الكافي*. (Mansurat al-Fajr: Beirut, 2007). Vol.7, p.164.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.164

near enemies¹⁵⁰; therefore, it skips all judicial procedures and rulings of the classical *fiqh* related with *riddah* and excommunicates Muslims to be able to kill them. Although non-Muslims killed by ISIS attract publicity in the international community, one should be reminded of the fact that ISIS has so far killed disproportionately more Muslims than non-Muslims, and the group's takfiri ideology has played a key role in these killings.

Salafi-jihadi groups differ on the issue of takfirism; and many of them see the takfiri ideology both Islamically and politically problematic. Even some of the Al-Qaeda offshoots use the term takfiri as a derogatory term. One of the most interesting discussions about takfirism was by Abu Musab Al-Suri, an influential intellectual figure in the modern Salafi-jihadi movements. He sees takfirism as a symptom of inhumane imprisonment of Salafi-jihadis and an invention of foreign intelligence services. Al-Suri argues that in prisons where Salafi-jihadis are jailed, torture and humiliating words against Islam are common practice which creates the psychological grounds for takfirism. Takfirism, therefore, is an extremist reaction against "the other" by Salafi-jihadis who started to see the world as black and white, us and them, Muslims and infidels. Al-Suri gives the formula for the emergence of takfirism in the following equation:

Takfirism=an infidel ruler+ torture+ a hypocritical Islamic scholar+ weak consciousness + an ignorant motivated young man

He further argues that takfirism is an invention of foreign intelligence services to divide the ranks of mujahedeen. It does not only divide the mujahedeen into separate groups and prevent a unified jihad; but also spreads animosity and mischief amongst the mujahedeen.¹⁵¹

The Dabiq Magazine is an invaluable source for demonstrating ISIS' takfirism, its ideas about other Muslims and how the group sanctions the killings of other Muslims. In an article entitled "Kill the Imams of *Kufr* in the West" where ISIS excommunicates well-known religious figures living in the West, the group clarifies its understanding of *riddah* and *kufr*:

¹⁵⁰Shahzad, S. S. Takfirism: A Messianic Ideology. *Le Monde Diplomatique*. July 2007, <http://mondediplo.com/2007/07/03takfirism>

¹⁵¹ Abu Musab Al-Suri, كيف نشأت التيارات التكفيرية؟, 16 August 2000, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTeQozkEM5o>

“Contrary to popular misconception, *riddah* (apostasy) does not exclusively mean to go from calling oneself a Muslim to calling oneself a Jew, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or otherwise. In reality, there are only two religions. There is the religion of Allah, which is Islam, and then the religion of anything else, which is *kufr*. Allah said, {Verily, the religion according to Allah is Islam} [Āl ‘Imrān: 19], and He said, {And whoever seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will never be accepted of him, and he will be among the losers in the end} [Āl ‘Imrān: 85]. So whatever is not Islam is not the religion according to Allah and it will never be accepted. Rather, it is the religion of losers in the end, which is *kufr*, as Allah said about the *kāfirīn*, {In the end, they are the losers} [An-Nahl: 109]. Therefore, anyone who falls into *kufr* has left Islam, even if he claims to be a Muslim. Ibn Hazm said, “There is no religion except Islam or *kufr*; whoever leaves one of them inevitably enters the other, as there is nothing in between them” [Al-Fisal].

The person who calls himself a “Muslim” but unapologetically commits blatant *kufr* is not a *munāfiq* (hypocrite), as some mistakenly claim. Rather, he is a *murtadd* (apostate). The difference between *nifāq* (hypocrisy) and *riddah* is that a *munāfiq* conceals his *kufr* and openly manifests Islam, quickly apologizing if ever his cover is blown. The *murtadd*, on the other hand, openly commits his *kufr* after ascribing to Islam.”¹⁵²

This passage underlines the black and white nature of the ISIS’ ideology, and its literal reading of Quranic verses to fit their agenda. As mentioned above, ISIS believes anyone who commits *kufr* is an apostate and should be killed. Also note that, the scope of *kufr* is also determined by ISIS; and for example, whoever rejects pledging allegiance to Al-Baghdadi (a *kufr* in ISIS standards) can easily be excommunicated.

The same issue, where ISIS excommunicates and slanders well-known Islamic figures and groups, is the perfect example of the level of takfirism that ISIS has reached. The headline in the cover page reads “The *murtadd* Brotherhood”; and ISIS excommunicates the Muslim Brotherhood due to its participation into democratic politics and elections. Among figures listed as *murtadd* by ISIS, there are well-known Islamic community leaders such as Hamza Yusuf of Zeytuna College, Yaser Qadi of the Al-Maghreb Institute, Nihad Awwad of CAIR, well-known Sufi sheikh Nazim Kibrisi. The article dealing with the “apostasy” of these figures ends with a message to the sympathizers and militants living in the West on how to address the issue of apostasy in the countries in which they live:

¹⁵² Dabiq Issue 14, p. 8

“One must either take the journey to *dār al-Islām*, joining the ranks of the *mujāhidīn* therein, or wage *jihād* by himself with the resources available to him (knives, guns, explosives, etc.) to kill the crusaders and other disbelievers and apostates, including the *imāms of kufr*, to make an example of them, as all of them are valid – rather, obligatory – targets according to the *Sharī’ah*, except for those who openly repent from *kufr* before they are apprehended.”¹⁵³

This passage unequivocally explains that ISIS sees capital punishment as the due punishment for apostasy, and it is telling that ISIS gives the right to execute the death penalty to individuals as opposed to the state institutions. In other words, ISIS recommends lone-wolf attacks as a group sanctioned punishment for apostasy in the West.

It is worth noting here that many Syrian opposition groups argue that ISIS resembles to the *Khawarij*, an extremist sect of Islam in the first Islamic century, due to its practice of *takfir*. For example, the Syrian Islamic Council issued a fatwa on ISIS in June 2014 in which the Council said all characteristics of the *khawarij*, which the Prophet ordered to fight against, have come together in ISIS and listed these characteristics as the following: “Issuing *takfir* against their opponents, the killing of Muslims with perverse obstinance, opposition to the truth with a false display of knowledge and with contempt towards the advice of the scholars, hatred against the creation (of Allah) in total ignorance of the rulings of the religion, severity, ferocity, and audacity against the believers with treachery and betrayal, broken promises and betrayal of trust.”¹⁵⁴ Similarly many well-known scholars including Abu Basir Al-Tartusi¹⁵⁵, Usama Al-Rifai of the Syrian Islamic Scholars Association¹⁵⁶ and Abu Yazan Al-Shami of Ahrar Al-Sham’s Sharia Office¹⁵⁷ issued fatwas to harshly criticize ISIS’ *takfirism*, argued that ISIS is *khawarij* and therefore fighting against ISIS is equal to *jihad*.

¹⁵³Ibid. p. 17

¹⁵⁴ Syrian Islamic Council *فتوى حول تنظيم الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام*, 15 June 2014, <http://sy-sic.com/?p=263>

¹⁵⁵ بيان للشيخ أبي بصير الطرطوسي, 1 February 2014, <https://goo.gl/GGO5WC>

¹⁵⁶ رئيس رابطة علماء الشام: أمراء تنظيم الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام لا يخافون الله, <http://www.syria-press.co/article.php?id=2516>

¹⁵⁷ محاضرة مرئية للشيخ أبو يزن الشامي عن الخوارج (داعش) بعنوان ويلك إن لم أعدل أنا فمن يعدل, 7 July 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0uXsk9ib9Y>

4.4. The Notion of the Caliphate in the Ideology of ISIS

After consolidating its power in Syria, ISIS headed towards its birthplace and priority, Iraq; and captured Falluja and Ramadi in January 2014. Consequently, ISIS attacked the second largest city of Iraq, Mosul, at the beginning of the month of June in the same year thanks to the alliances it formed in Iraq, ammunition and weapons transferred from Syria, weakness of the central government in Baghdad and the hostility of the Sunnis towards the central government in Iraq. The clashes went on between 4 and 6 of June, and ISIS captured the strategic city of Mosul in six days to the surprise of many outside observers. Mosul had a transformative effect on ISIS similar to the group's entrance into Syria. With the capture of Mosul, ISIS began controlling a vast territory stretching from Syria to Iraq and started to push towards Kirkuk and Baghdad. Through videos and statements posted after the capture of Mosul by ISIS, the group declared that it had destroyed both the borders drawn by the Sykes-Picot Agreement¹⁵⁸ and the Western-made concepts like Syria and Iraq. In terms of territorial control, ISIS became an entity which can compete with many Middle Eastern states. At the same time, the group acquired both military and financial bounties after the escape of the Iraqi officers from the city which gave ISIS the title of the richest terrorist organization in the world.¹⁵⁹ In addition to the military and financial gains, the quick capture of Mosul contributed to ISIS at two distinct levels. First of all, ISIS, which has strong messianic and apocalyptic tendencies, pursued a propaganda campaign in which it presented the rapid capture of Mosul as the fulfillment of the awaited prophecy and promise of Allah. This campaign both increased the morale and motivation of the existing militants and made the group even more attractive for the potential recruits. Secondly, the fall of Mosul into the hands of ISIS made the group the top item in the international news, and it has retained its publicity levels since then. In other words, ISIS, which cares excessively about publicity, has reached the level of infamy and is gaining the media attention that it has long been seeking. This publicity was a double edged sword for ISIS. On the one hand, it increased the rage against ISIS and accelerated the

¹⁵⁸ كسر الحدود, 29 June 2014, <https://archive.org/details/kaser-al70odud>

¹⁵⁹ The World's 10 Richest Terrorist Organizations. *Forbes*. 12 December 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesinternational/2014/12/12/the-worlds-10-richest-terrorist-organizations/#640057b82ffa>

preparation for anti-ISIS operations. But on the other hand, it attracted more recruits to its ranks due to the publicity and increasing polarization giving the group an opportunity to lay the political, sociological and perceptual groundwork for the declaration of the “caliphate.”

ISIS waited long to declare the caliphate and only after the capture of Mosul did the group think it could go ahead with the caliphate project.¹⁶⁰ The caliphate had been at the center of ISIS’ roadmap since the establishment of the organisation;¹⁶¹ and even its predecessors spoke highly of the goal of declaring the caliphate. With the territorial gains in Deir ez-Zor, especially the capture of Al Bukamal, ISIS started to control an area stretching from Aleppo to Diyala. ISIS came to an understanding that all financial, military and geographical requirements have been met; and therefore, its spokesman Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani declared the establishment of the caliphate on 30 June 2014 with an audio recording entitled “This is the promise of Allah”. The recording was particularly important in terms of underlying the significance of the concept of the caliphate in ISIS’ ideology. After talking about pre-Islamic Arabs who gained enormous power and prestige after accepting Islam, Al-Adnani went on to quote Islamic sources on issues regarding the caliphate. He argued that the rise of ISIS would usher in a new era for the Muslims who had been “drowning in oceans of disgrace”. According to him, ISIS prepared the grounds for the declaration:

“Here the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of tawhīd (monotheism), rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala. Beneath it, the walls of the tawāghīt (rulers claiming the rights of Allah) have been demolished, their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed. Their soldiers are either killed, imprisoned, or defeated. The Muslims are honored. The kuffār (infidels) are disgraced. Ahlus- Sunnah (the Sunnis) are masters and are esteemed. The people of bid’ah (heresy) are humiliated. The hudūd (Sharia penalties) are implemented – the hudūd of Allah – all of them. The frontlines are defended. Crosses and graves are demolished. Prisoners are released by the edge of the sword. The people in the lands of the State move about for their livelihood and journeys, feeling safe regarding their lives and wealth. Wulāt (plural of wālī or “governors”) and judges have been appointed. Jizyah (a tax imposed on kuffār) has been enforced. Fay’ (money taken from the kuffār without battle) and zakat (obligatory alms) have been collected. Courts

¹⁶⁰ Ali A. S. "داعش يعيد التاريخ 90 عاماً إلى الوراء" 30 June 2014, Al-Safir. <http://assafir.com/Article/1/358600>

¹⁶¹ Hashim A. S. *Iraq's Sunni Insurgency*. Adelphi Paper No. 402, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Routledge, 2005. pp. 34-35

have been established to resolve disputes and complaints. Evil has been removed. Lessons and classes have been held in the masājīd and, by the grace of Allah, the religion has become completely for Allah.”¹⁶²

For Al-Adnani, there only remained one matter: the declaration of the caliphate and the belief that the Islamic ummah sins by abandoning or postponing it. The path towards the caliphate was explained in detail in the Dabiq Magazine. It is worth noting that the stages explained by both Al-Adnani and the Dabiq Magazine are deeply inspired by the Management of Savagery as discussed in the beginning of the fifth chapter. The path is composed of five stages. The first stage, *Hijrah*, involves immigrating to a land with a weak central authority to use as a base where a Salafi-jihadi community can be formed, then recruit and train militants. Formation of a Salafi-jihadi community (*jama'ah*) is the second stage. After reaching to a certain operational capability, the community should organize attacks on the local forces to force them out of the rural areas and increase the chaos to a point leading to the collapse of the *taghut* regimes (*Tawahhush* as defined in the Management of Savagery). After the third stage, the destabilization of the *taghut*, the community should fill the power vacuum, manage the *tawahhush* and initiate the fourth stage (*tamkin*) of developing into a full-fledge state. The last stage is the declaration of the caliphate after achieving the previous stages one by one.¹⁶³(See Figure 1)

Convinced that ISIS went through all those stages, there was no legal constrain that could justify delaying or neglecting, ISIS declared the caliphate; and the Shura Council appointed “the sheikh, the mujāhid, the scholar who practices what he preaches, the worshipper, the leader, the warrior, the reviver, descendent from the family of the Prophet, the slave of Allah, Ibrāhīm Ibn ‘Awwād Ibn Ibrāhīm Ibn ‘Alī Ibn Muhammad al-Badrī al-Hāshimī al-Husaynī al-Qurashī by lineage, as-Sāmurrā’ī by birth and upbringing, al-Baghdādī by residence and scholarship” as the caliph.¹⁶⁴ After the declaration of the caliphate, ISIS dropped Syria and Iraq, which the group believed to be a Western innovation, from its name, and started to use the title of Caliph Ibrahim for Al-Baghdadi.

¹⁶² Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani. هذا وعد الله، 30 June 2014, https://archive.org/details/Waad_201408

¹⁶³ Dabiq Issue 1, p. 38

¹⁶⁴ Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani. هذا وعد الله

Declaration of the caliphate by ISIS with universal claims over all Muslims drew harsh criticism from the Syrian opposition groups and renowned Islamic scholars all over the world. While only a very tiny and marginal group within the Salafi-jihadi community took the declaration seriously, the vast majority of Muslims including mainstream Islamic scholars as well as scholars affiliated with Al-Qaeda rejected the declaration and considered it void. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi and Ali Muhyiddin Karadaghi of International Union of Muslim Scholars issued a statement whereby they argued that the declaration of an Islamic caliphate by ISIS violates sharia law and is void under Islamic law.¹⁶⁵ They further claimed that the declaration has no legitimacy under Islamic law, and ISIS keeps harming the Muslims of Iraq and Syria with this declaration. Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, a renowned jihadi ideologue, on the other hand, argued that a caliphate could not be established only through declaration; and that ISIS harmed the very concept of the caliphate with its declaration of a void caliphate. He said the ISIS declaration is a “rush job” and illegitimate as the entity that ISIS established is far away from being a safe haven for Muslims because of the oppression and takfir that ISIS has been using against Muslims.¹⁶⁶

The caliphate according to ISIS did not only mean reaching to the last stage of a long-lasting project which is believed to be divinely sanctioned; it also brought ISIS to the fore as the central actor in an apocalyptic event. Establishment of the caliphate is the final stage of ISIS’ messianic ideology and their preparation for the grand battle as discussed in previous sections. ISIS is not a homogenous group; while there are militants who have been pursuing their own realistic and pragmatist goals inside the group, there are also those who believed that they are an important actor in a divine project; that is the caliphate.¹⁶⁷ Some of ISIS’ militants already had messianic thoughts before joining the group and lived pious lives, while others were introduced to the messianic ideas later and considered being soldiers of the caliphate as a means of redemption. The role that ISIS attributes to itself and main tenets of its ideology from takfirism to caliphate bear strong messianic and

¹⁶⁵ القرضاوي: إعلان "داعش" للخلافة باطل شرعاً *El-Arabi El-Cedid*. 5 July 2014, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2014/7/5/إعلان-القرضاوي-إعلان-الخلافة-داعش>

¹⁶⁶ Ebu Muhammed El-Makdisi. 11 July 2014. <https://justpaste.it/g7x6>

¹⁶⁷ Various interviews with ISIS members and sympathizers

apocalyptic elements. Understanding these elements is crucial in deconstructing ISIS' ideology; thereby, offering efficient ways to combat its strategy of terror.

Figure 1: Stages of the ISIS Caliphate



5. The Power Structure of ISIS: The Leadership and Militant Profiles

“There are people who think that the Jihad in Syria is 24/7 fighting but it is much more relaxed than that. They’re calling it a five-star jihad.”

Iftekhhar Jaman

Doing research on ISIS is extremely difficult due to the secrecy surrounding the group more reminiscent of intelligence agencies, its state-like structure, its ever-changing leadership cadres and its complex web of relations with various actors. It is therefore not a coincidence that most of the works written on ISIS focus on the group’s history and ideology rather than its current organizational schema and militant profile. In order to write competently about its current structure and militant profile, either ISIS has to be a transparent group or one must have the opportunity to do first-hand research. Under existing conditions, unfortunately, neither option is realizable. As discussed earlier, ISIS is neither a journalist nor researcher friendly group, and notorious for its executions of journalists and foreigners if they are suspected of working as government agents. This makes doing first-hand research on ISIS a very risky endeavor. Nevertheless, in-depth interviews with ISIS militants and Syrian armed opposition members including those with Salafi-jihadi backgrounds, ISIS’ audio and video recordings as well as their online magazines, and leaked organizational documents offer invaluable data on the group’s structure, hierarchy and modes of operation.

This chapter will deal with the organizational profile of ISIS by delineating the hierarchy of the group, and questioning what this hierarchy means for the group’s operations inside Syria. The group has a generally accepted organizational structure with Al-Baghdadi at the head overseeing his deputies in Syria and Iraq and several councils which deal with various tasks. The frequent demise of military and political leaders of ISIS make it quite difficult to keep track of the current leadership, and this chapter will demonstrate that -except for a few figures- system is more important than individuals. Having said this, this chapter will note that the power game inside ISIS, as well as its

hierarchical structure, is very sophisticated and it would be wrong to approach the organisation solely as a military body. The role of foreign fighters in ISIS and motivations for joining the group will also be addressed by referring to the ideological codes of the group, discussing the nature of the Syrian crisis and the pragmatic reasons for which some of the recruits join ISIS. This chapter will discuss pulling and pushing factors, as well as the causal factors and opportunities provided with regard to the foreign fighter phenomenon that has been dominating the cadres of ISIS. It will also deal with the question of to what extent previous religious indoctrination is important for the new recruits, shedding light on the level of religious education among them.

5.1. Power Structure of ISIS

There is a strict hierarchy inside ISIS starting from the so-called caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi down to the people living under the control of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The group which expanded quite rapidly was forced to establish a bureaucratic structure due to the huge number of people living under its rule and the vast territory it controls. ISIS' top decision-making mechanisms and administrative structure in the provinces were shaped in time, consequently creating a rigid power structure. An important thing to note here is that many of the ISIS leaders who occupy important posts in this power structure have been targeted by airstrikes and killed in combat; hence, there is almost a constant change in the top leadership. Additionally, ISIS has been pursuing a policy of ambiguity regarding the condition of its leadership; and sometimes it takes months to announce a person's death. Unconfirmed statements given by the Syrian opposition and the International Coalition with regard to the killing of certain ISIS leaders also create confusion about the fate of those who were claimed to be dead. For example, rumors about the death of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and Abu Omar Al-Shishani were circulated several times in the international media with statements by unnamed officials; however, ISIS either denied the rumors or made no further statements. Just recently, after the claims of being killed many times before by the international media, ISIS confirmed the death of Al-Shishani. The fact that ISIS leadership is not screen-friendly and avoids giving appearances on TV, with only a

few exceptions, also complicates discussions about whether a specific figure from ISIS is alive or not.

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi sits at the top of the group's power hierarchy. After his appointment as the "caliph" by the members of the Shura Council in June 2014, Al-Baghdadi rose to the top of the pyramid and became the highest decision-maker in affairs related to military, politics and religion. His ascension to power has been explained in detail in the previous chapter; his Qureishi lineage, Iraqi citizenship, his PhD on Quranic Sciences at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences of the Baghdad University have been often emphasized by ISIS during the appointment as the caliph and afterwards. In his declaration of the caliphate, the group's spokesperson, Al-Adnani, praised Al-Baghdadi as "the sheikh, the mujāhid, the scholar who practices what he preaches, the worshipper, the leader, the warrior, the reviver, descendent from the family of the Prophet, the slave of Allah,"¹⁶⁸ and emphasized that he is the best fit for the post of the caliphate.

ISIS has been operating mainly in two countries: Syria and Iraq; it is known that Al-Baghdadi has two deputies who are responsible for Syrian and Iraqi affairs separately. Previously, Abu Muslim Al-Turkmani, a Turkoman from the Iraqi city of Tal Afar, was Al-Baghdadi's deputy in Iraq; while another Turkoman reportedly from the vicinity of Mosul, Abu Ali Al-Anbari, was his deputy in Syria.¹⁶⁹ Both names served as officers in the army of Saddam Hussein; and similarly both were inmates at the infamous Camp Bucca. As discussed earlier, Camp Bucca was probably the place where the idea of ISIS in its current form originated and where the core leadership of the group met and made preliminary planning. Al-Turkmani is known for his close ties with Izeddin Al-Duri who was an important Saddam era general and the leader of the Army of Naqshbandi, which was a key force during the capture of Mosul.¹⁷⁰ After the death of Al-Turkmani on 22 August 2015 and Al-Anbari in March 2016, the names who replaced them as Al-Baghdadi's deputies are still unclear. According to one claim, after the death of Al-Turkmani, Al-Anbari was relocated to Iraq and replaced Al-Turkmani. Abu Lokman, a.k.a. Ali Musa Al-Shawa, was

¹⁶⁸ Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani. هذا وعد الله

¹⁶⁹ Barrett, R, *The Islamic State*. p.33

¹⁷⁰ Hisham Al-Hashmi. عالم داعش. p. 197

appointed as Al-Baghdadi's deputy in Syria. Al-Shawa, originally from Raqqa, used to be the group's governor in Raqqa and was jailed in the Sadnaya Prison, the Syrian version of Camp Bucca in terms of being the center of radicalization for the Salafi-jihadis.¹⁷¹

There are seven councils at the top of ISIS' bureaucratic hierarchy. These councils execute administrative and military duties, and besides their own hierarchical structures, three names- Al-Baghdadi and his deputies- oversee their performance. The most important of all councils is the Shura Council, headed by Abu Arkan Al-Ameri, which consists of 9 to 11 members and includes Al-Baghdadi's deputies in Syria and Iraq, official spokesman and the heads of other councils.¹⁷² The domination of Iraqi nationals in the council is particularly noteworthy; and during some periods all members of the council were Iraqis. The council has a wide range of duties including the appointment and deposing (in theory) of the Caliph, taking key administrative and military decisions and overseeing them. Al-Furqan media, the semi official outlet of ISIS, lists the Shura Council's duties as the following: implementing the *hudud* (punishments), enforcing the people's adherence to religious rulings, upholding and spreading the religion, defending the homeland, fortifying the fronts, preparing the armies.¹⁷³ (See Figure 2) In other words, the council deals extensively with matters related to religion, military as well as judiciary. All key decisions have to be ratified by the council. Due to security concerns, all council members never convene in one place; instead, a group within the Shura council takes a decision and puts it into writing to send it to the other members for their approval.¹⁷⁴ Many of the interviewees also claimed that there is a core group within the Shura Council that is composed of Al-Baghdadi, his deputies, Al-Adnani and Hajj Furqan¹⁷⁵ who from time to time convene to take key decisions. The decisions taken by the Shura Council is legally binding.

Figure 2: Responsibilities of the Shura Council

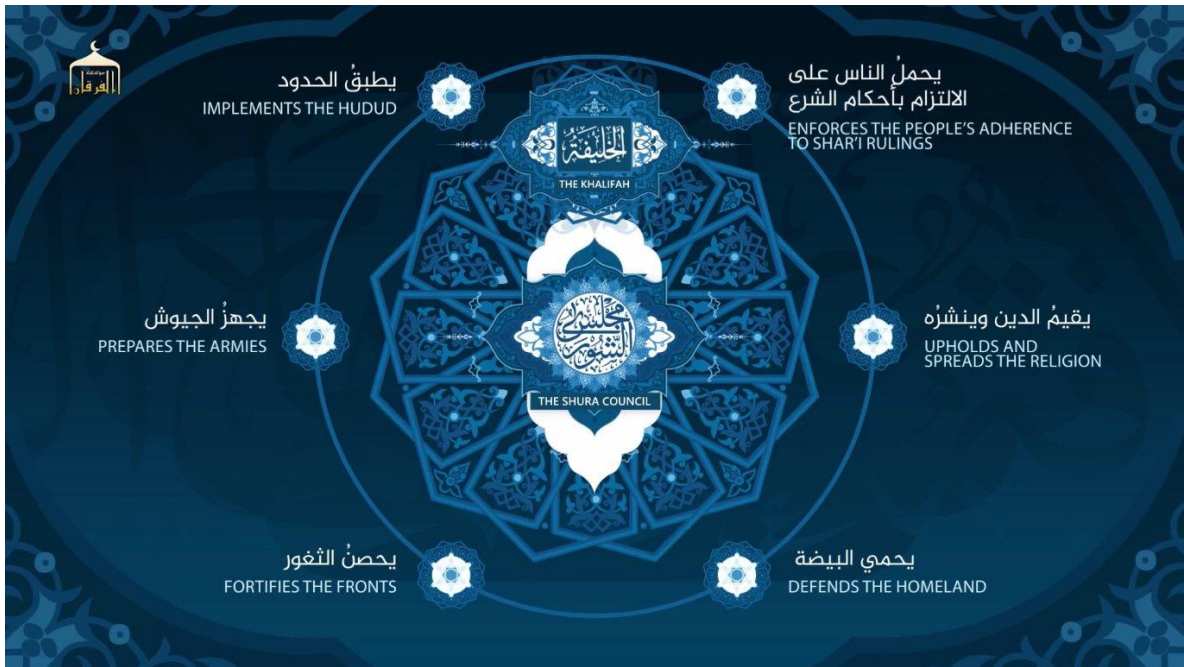
¹⁷¹ Interview with Muzamjeer Al-Sham

¹⁷² Hisham Al-Hashimi. *عالم داعش*. p. 181

¹⁷³ Al-Furqan Media, 6 July 2016

¹⁷⁴ Interviews with ISIS members in Syria.

¹⁷⁵ Interviews with ISIS members and armed opposition members.



A highly influential council in the power structure of ISIS is the Sharia Council, which is headed by Abu Muhammad Al-Ani. The council works directly under Al-Baghdadi, checks the decisions taken by other councils for their compliance with the religious law and also issues fatwas. The council is composed of six members; and with the help of subcommittees, it ensures party discipline, provides rules and decides penalties for their infringement, supervises the sharia police and courts and oversees ideological outreach (*da'wah*), both in areas under the State's control and beyond.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, the religious indoctrination of the new recruits is coordinated by the institutions overseen by the Sharia Council. There are head muftis responsible for Syria and Iraq; and these muftis oversee the performance of the Sharia committees operating in the provinces. These committees deal with a wide array of issues from religious education to *da'wah* activities and mosques. While the Arabs dominate the council, the Saudis usually have higher representation.¹⁷⁷ Key figures in the council include Abu Ayyub Al-Breigi, Turki Binali and Munzir Al-Urduni.¹⁷⁸ It is worth noting that unlike the religious figures of Al-Nusra, the Sharia leaders of ISIS are not renowned names, and are mostly uninfluential figures in

¹⁷⁶ Barrett, R., *The Islamic State*. p.30

¹⁷⁷ Hisham Al-Hashimi. *عالم داعش*. p. 180

¹⁷⁸ Haşim, A., Who holds the real power in IS? Al-Monitor. 19 February 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/islamic-state-sharia-council-power.html>

terms of their level of authority in religious affairs. Two important works, *Management of Savagery of Abu Bakr Naji* and *Jurisprudence of Jihad of Abu Abdullah Al-Muhajeer* (Abdurrahman Al-Ali), are said to be quite influential in the decision-making mechanisms of the Sharia Council.¹⁷⁹ The first book was analyzed in detail in the previous chapters; Al-Muhajeer's book, on the other hand, has been one of the most influential books on the dogma of jihad among Salafi-jihadi groups. Al-Zarqawi himself studied the book under Al-Muhajeer with his and therefore ISIS' understanding of jihad and relations with other Muslims being deeply influenced by the book. The book is particularly known for its strict rulings against non-Muslims and apostates; and argues that Islam does not differentiate between civilians and militants. Al-Muhajeer thinks Muslims should leave any country which is not ruled by Sharia laws, and sees brutality as a deterrent force during war. For example, the beheadings, a common practice of ISIS, are praised by Al-Muhajeer who argues that beheadings are dear to God and his prophet.¹⁸⁰

The groundwork for the Security and Intelligence Council was laid down before the establishment of ISIS, and Hajj Bakr formed an intelligence unit after his and Al-Baghdadi's arrival in Syria. This unit was responsible for the assassinations of the Salafi-jihadis who refused to pledge allegiance to Al-Baghdadi and also collected materials about rival factions which could be used to blackmail them.¹⁸¹ Hajj Bakr is the mastermind behind ISIS' intelligence and security apparatus, and Abu Ali Al-Anbari replaced him after his death. Who is Al-Anbari's replacement after his own recent death is currently not clear.

Due to the nature of ISIS and the setting in which it is located; the Military Council is one of the most important of the group. Abu Ahmed Al-Alwani headed this key council until his death in 2014 when he was replaced by one of the few non-Arab figures among the top ISIS leadership, Abu Omar Al-Shishani, who remained for two years until he was also killed in 2016. Al-Shishani was of Georgian-Chechen origin and came from the Pankisi-Gorge region in Georgia which is known for its proliferation of Salafi-jihadi groups. Al-Shishani was an experienced fighter who headed *Jaysh Al-Muhajereen w'al-*

¹⁷⁹Interviews with ISIS members.

¹⁸⁰ Al-Muhajeer, A, *مسائل في فقه الجهاد*, pp. 34-38

¹⁸¹Tweets by @wikibaghdady and interview with Muzamjeer Al-Sham.

Ansar before joining ISIS. Abu Ayman Al-Iraqi is also another important figure in the Military Council so much so that some claimed that he in effect was the real replacement of Al-Alwani as the head of the council.¹⁸² Al-Iraqi was the governor of ISIS in the coastal provinces; he served as an intelligence officer in the Iraqi army during the Saddam era, and he is, like Al-Anbari, a figure close to Al-Duri.

In addition to these councils, there are also Provincial, Financial and Media Councils. These councils operate according to their areas of expertise and retain partial autonomy in their operations on local issues. This enables the group to take decisions and act upon them swiftly. The Media Council handles the media and publicity operations, an activity on which ISIS places great value, through Al-Furqan Media and social media accounts. The Financial Council works like a treasury and executes responsibilities with regard to paying salaries, financing social projects and supporting the families of “martyrs”. ISIS generates income from oil sales, smuggling, confiscation of properties, sale of electricity, extortion, sale of agricultural products, taxes and ransom money.

The Provincial Councils are administrative bodies overseeing the administration of the provinces in Syria and Iraq. According to ISIS, there are 19 provinces inside Syria and Iraq, and 16 provinces in other countries. Most of the provinces listed by ISIS are merely names with no substantial ISIS administrative presence; while in some provinces such as Raqqa, ISIS has established full control with sophisticated administrative bodies and tools. The provinces in Iraq are Baghdad, Al-Anbar, Salahaddin, Falluja, Diyala, North Baghdad, the South, Nineva, Kirkuk, Al-Jazeera, Dijla (The Tigris), and Al-Furat (The Euphrates); in Syria, Al-Raqqa, Damascus, Aleppo, Hums, Hama, Al-Khayr (Deir ez-Zor), Al-Barka (Hasaka).¹⁸³(See Figure 3) Outside Syria and Iraq, ISIS only has territorial control in Libya and Nigeria, although the group declared the establishment of provinces in Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Russia, West Africa, Iran (Khorasan) and Afghanistan. ISIS has received allegiances from various groups in these countries; however allegiance does not automatically mean territorial control. For example, groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria,

¹⁸² Barrett, R., *The Islamic State*. p.31

¹⁸³ Al-Furqan Media, 6 July 2016

“Islamic State” group in Derna in Libya and Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis in Egypt declared their *bay’ah* to ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

Figure 3: ISIS Provinces in Syria and Iraq



5.2. The Profiles of the ISIS Militants

Iftekhar Jaman, a British national of Bangladeshi origin, who went to Syria to fight in the ranks of ISIS, said: “There are people who think that the Jihad in Syria is 24/7 fighting but it is much more relaxed than that. They’re calling it a five-star jihad.”¹⁸⁴ Jaman’s message, which was one of the hundreds of messages sent by jihadis in Syria to Muslims around the world, was a strategy that ISIS has been following to attract new recruits from the Muslim world. ISIS sent messages to Muslims all around the world in their own languages and in conformity with different social and cultural spheres and

¹⁸⁴The British Muslims waging 'five-star jihad', Daily Mail, 21 November 2013. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2511513/British-Muslims-wage-star-jihad-Al-Qaeda-war-torn-Syria.html>

recruited thousands of people from rich and poor, educated and uneducated, European and Arab. Regardless of the real quality of life under ISIS rule, it is quite clear that financial, logistical and even matrimonial opportunities offered by ISIS to the new recruits were instrumental in attracting more and more people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. There are two main audiences to which ISIS' addresses its publicity campaign. The first group consists of Muslims living in the Western countries who are hesitant about moving to Syria to join ISIS because they think their quality of life would diminish remarkably. ISIS promises this group a life in which they do not have to give up all their luxury if they move to Syria to live under ISIS rule. Jaman's call is primarily targeting this group by exaggerating the living conditions and the quality of life so that Muslims from the Western countries leave aside some of their hesitations. Potential recruits from impoverished countries or especially those who are experiencing social, economic or political problems in their home countries constitute the second group. ISIS' message to this group is that if they make "Hijrah" to Syria, in addition to the divine reward for responding to the call to jihad, they would also have some worldly rewards. ISIS is a group which diversifies its messages and strategy based on its audience; and it knows very well that potential recruits are not ethnically, socioeconomically or even religiously homogenous.

In terms of the primary motivations for joining ISIS, there are three groups. The first group consists of people with a history of criminal activity who have experienced problems with socialization or integration in their home countries, have used or dealt in drugs and/or served time in prison. These recruits usually have problems with the society in which they have been living; and thrive on being controversial, not only on religious but also other non-religious matters. Most of them have the characteristics of social psychopaths and are open to criminal activity. For instance, the Paris attacker, Amedy Coulibaly, was previously jailed on offenses of armed robbery and drug dealing; while the suicide bombers in Brussels, brothers Ibrahim and Khaled Bakroui, served time on charges

of carjacking and armed robbery.¹⁸⁵ This typology is common especially among those coming from Western societies; however, there is also a similar trend among the recruits coming from Muslim countries. Apparently, some of them try to justify their criminality by submitting to a “higher” body and attributing a “holy” objective to their criminal acts. The second group are the pragmatists who joined or entered in a marriage of convenience with ISIS to reach their own individual or communal goals. They consider ISIS as the most efficient tool to realize their own individual or communal agendas. Ideologically speaking, this group of people does not necessarily buy ISIS’ religious and messianic arguments; some of them are even staunch secularists. A significant number of the Saddam-era officers and tribes can be categorized under this group. As discussed earlier, a minority of the Saddam-era officers who joined the ranks of ISI/ISIS converted to the Salafi-jihadi ideology and became believers in ISIS’ creed and methodology. The remaining approached ISIS rather pragmatically without accepting ISIS’ ideology. The third group constitutes the backbone of ISIS and is composed of the Salafi-jihadis who from its initiation have been practicing takfirism and messianism; they have put the concepts of jihad and caliphate at the center of their lives. This group is the ideological engine of ISIS and generally occupies important spots in ISIS’ power structure. As is the case in many other messianic movements, this group is highly unlikely to leave when and if the organization’s main prophecies fail. The loyalty of the pragmatists shifts quickly and the psychopaths can be easily disillusioned; while the third group, as demonstrated by the evolution of the Salafi-jihadism since Al-Zarqawi, is the guarantee of the survival of the ideology in different forms and under different names.

The heterogeneous nature of ISIS is directly linked with the number of militants fighting under the group. It should be noted here that, despite ISIS’ efforts to homogenize its recruits, militants coming from different parts of the world with different backgrounds ultimately do not constitute a homogenous body. There are various, often conflicting, estimates about the total number of ISIS militants. It is quite difficult to accurately know the total number of ISIS’ fighting force due to the “dangers that ISIS presents for

¹⁸⁵New ISIS recruits have deep criminal roots. *The Washington Post*. 23 March 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/new-isis-recruits-have-deep-criminal-roots/2016/03/23/89b2e590-f12e-11e5-a61f-e9c95c06edca_story.html

journalists and intelligence operatives on the ground.”¹⁸⁶ Since there is no “official” number shared by ISIS itself, there are different estimates about the total size of ISIS’ fighting force in Syria and Iraq and the number of foreign fighters in the ranks of the group. Another difficulty is posed in assessing who should be categorized as a fighter as ISIS has security units (*hisbah*) inside towns that do not fight on the fronts, logistics personnel, border guards and intelligence operatives. There are also many people who moved to ISIS controlled territory to live under ISIS rule as civilians. The combination of these different categories undoubtedly complicates making estimates by Western and regional sources.

US sources have estimated that ISIS currently has around 25,000 militants in Syria and Iraq.¹⁸⁷ This number is down from the 30,000 estimated at the end of 2015.¹⁸⁸ In 2014, the CIA estimated that the number of ISIS militants was somewhere between 20,000 and 31,500¹⁸⁹, while this number was 50% less prior to June 2014 when ISIS declared the caliphate. There were several turning points that provided ISIS with the opportunity to receive more militants. The capture of Mosul, the geographical unification of parts of Syria and Iraq, the sensational videos posted on the internet and social media and most importantly the declaration of the caliphate all attracted increasing numbers to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. In other words, the success of ISIS on the ground helped the group to boost the numbers of its militants. On the other hand, the beginning of the international coalition’s airstrikes and Turkey’s artillery strikes as well as increasing intelligence sharing among international actors with regard to potential recruits stopped the flow of militants and decreased the number of ISIS’ fighting force.

Based on field research and interviews, this study estimates that the number of ISIS’ fighting force in Syria is currently somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000. This number does not include the support and logistics personnel. By April 2016, ISIS had around 18,500 fighters; approximately 11,500 foreign while 7,000 of them were Syrian nationals.

¹⁸⁶ Stern J, Berger, J.M. *In ISIS: The State of Terror*. p. 17

¹⁸⁷ Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest ,2 April 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/04/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-242016>

¹⁸⁸ Micah Zenko. "How Many Bombs Did the United States Drop in 2015?" Council on Foreign Relations. 2016

¹⁸⁹ “ISIS can 'muster' between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, CIA says”, CNN, 12 Eylül 2014. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/>

These numbers include the fighters of the groups such as Jaysh Khalid Ibn Walid, Liwa Shuhada Yarmouk and Harakat Al-Muthanna Al-Islamiyya which can be considered as a part of ISIS although they have not so far declared their allegiances openly to ISIS. The total number of ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq combined is around 35,000; and 60% of this force is located in Iraq.¹⁹⁰

5.3. The Foreign Fighters

A majority of ISIS fighters in Syria are foreign; while Syrian nationals constitute the minority. However Peter Neumann of the King's College estimates that the percentage of the foreign fighters in ISIS in total is around 40%.¹⁹¹ According to research done by the Souffan Group, a much higher estimate of between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters from 86 countries entered Syria and Iraq up till December 2015; and a majority of them joined ISIS.¹⁹² Despite the differences in estimates, all sources agree that the number of foreign fighters arriving in Syria and Iraq has exceeded the number of those involved in the Soviet-Afghan War which was estimated at 20,000. Contrary to what Neumann argues, our research and interviews indicated that around 60% of ISIS fighters are foreign. Middle Easterners dominate the foreign fighters in terms of the number; while only one fifth of the foreigners come from Western Europe.¹⁹³ Tunisian, Saudis and Jordanians top the list; and there are also as many Russian nationals, originating from the Caucasus, as the Jordanians. In Western Europe, France tops the list with around 650 fighters, and Germany comes second. The return rate among militants coming from Western countries is between 20-30%, while it is around 10-15% in total .

The Salafi-jihadi groups usually act cautiously about the foreign fighters. As Abu Khalid Al-Suri has been quoted as saying: "One cannot trust foreign fighters, unless proven

¹⁹⁰Interviews with members of armed groups which are bordering with ISIS in different parts of Syria.

¹⁹¹ See Neumann P., *Die neuen Dschihadisten*. Econ Verlag, Mnnih, 2015.

¹⁹²An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq. The Soufan Group. December 2015. http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate_FINAL3.pdf

¹⁹³Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000. ICSR. 26 January 2015. <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>

otherwise.” This idea comes from the long Salafi-jihadi experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq and Yemen, and points to the risk one takes when admitting a foreign fighter into the group. There is usually the system of *tazkiya* (reference) in the groups coming from the Salafi-jihadi tradition. A reference from an existing and trusted figure in the group used to be a requirement for the new recruits. ISIS followed this tradition carefully at the beginning, but with the enormous and rapid expansion of the group through the capture of new territories and flow of foreign fighters, the system eroded and the group became easier to join. ISIS militants told the author that *tazkiya* is a system used by the Salafi-jihadi organizations; while ISIS is a state, a caliphate, and it is impossible to ask *tazkiya* from each person who wants to join ISIS or live under ISIS control.¹⁹⁴ On the one hand, this flexibility made ISIS even more open to infiltration by intelligence services. On the other hand, the lack of trust has persisted, and this may be one of the reasons why foreign fighters do not occupy top echelons of ISIS’ power structure, except a few notable figures such as Abu Omar Al-Shishani. In the same manner, the foreign fighters have to prove themselves and gain the trust of their superiors by fighting in the fronts and sometimes becoming suicide bombers.¹⁹⁵

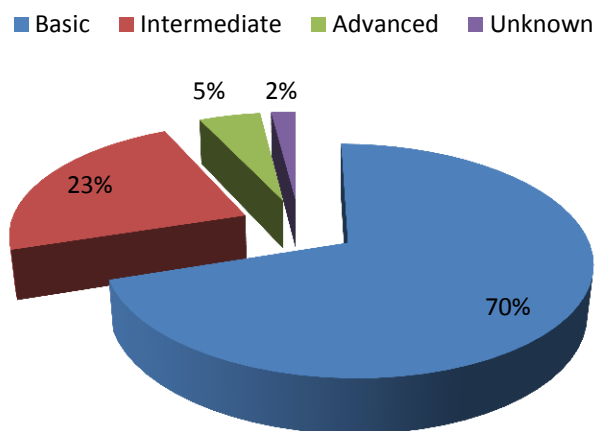
In March 2016, Zaman AlWasl, a website close to the Syrian insurgents and known for its publication of leaked documents, published hundreds of questionnaires captured from ISIS border guards. The forms, filled in by the new recruits at the border posts, provide a wealth of information about the profiles of the new recruits. The first of its kind ever published, the questionnaires asked the new recruits 23 questions including their names, birth places, birth dates, country of origin, occupation, blood type, level of religious education and desired job in ISIS. According to the classification of the questionnaires, there were 77 countries represented with the Saudis topping the list. The median age of the new recruits is 26 with those coming from the Western countries younger than those coming from the Middle East. They are mostly educated with recruits from the Western countries generally having a better education than others. Most common occupations are

¹⁹⁴ Interviews with ISIS members.

¹⁹⁵ Gates S., Podder, S., “Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p. 111

unskilled laborers, traders and students. One of the most interesting outcomes is that around 70% of the new recruits have only a basic religious education. The low level of religious education among new recruits gives ISIS the opportunity to shape their religious understanding and utilize religion to their benefit. The foreign fighters who arrive in Syria and Iraq with only basic religious education are indoctrinated by ISIS officials according to the group's takfirism and messianism. Meanwhile, they also continue with the radicalization which they started earlier in their home countries; and this combined with messianic and takfiri indoctrination transforms the new recruits into senseless killing machines.

Table 8: Level Of Religious Education Among New ISIS Recruits



6. From ISI to ISIS: The Transformation of ISI/ISIS in Syria

“The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify –by Allah’s permission –until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq”

Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi

ISI saw a unique opportunity with the advent of peaceful demonstrations and the subsequent transformation of the demonstrations into an armed insurgency against the Assad regime in Syria. ISI, which was weakened and went underground due to the fight with the Sahwa Councils, started to recover in Iraq exploiting political and military realities on the ground. Al-Maliki’s authoritarian rule, disenfranchisement of the Sunnis in Iraq, alliances with the Sunni tribes and the Saddam era officers, the US withdrawal of troops from Iraq, and the non-functioning Iraqi state in general all helped ISI to come back onto the Iraqi scene with a revised road map and strategy. Syria, on the other hand, was seen by the ISI leaders as a suitable territory to expand the group’s activities and attract more financial and human support. Hence, the ISI leadership started the process through which ISI affiliated groups would enter Syria and lay down the groundwork for ISI’s operations in a country that was rapidly turning into a failed state. The failed nature of the states, like the one in Iraq, have proven to be conducive to the strengthening of the ISI-like armed groups which try to establish their own areas of control and expand their support base. In this period, ISI followed a strategy of raiding prisons in which large numbers of ISI members and other Salafi-jihadis were held. Between 2012 and 2014, ISI raided several establishments and freed scores of Salafi-jihadis, most of whom joined the ranks of ISI. On 27 September 2012, ISI attacked the Tasfirat prison in Tikrit ensuring the escape of, amongst others,⁴⁷ senior ISI leaders and 116 prisoners awaiting execution. On 21 July 2013, ISI attacked the notorious high security prison of Abu Ghuraib with VBIEDs and heavy weapons and freed 681 prisoners including many high level ISI operatives.¹⁹⁶ On the same day, ISI also attack Taji prison and killed over 60 security personnel but failed to

¹⁹⁶ Al-Hashimi H., *عالم داعش*. (Baghdad: Dar Al-Babel, 2015), p. 285

break in. On 10 June 2014, ISI targeted the Badush prison, the second biggest penitentiary in Iraq after Abu Ghuraib, and freed 2,900 inmates in one day, 326 of whom were ISI members.¹⁹⁷ A considerable number of the ISI members who were freed by these break-ins between 2012 and 2014 passed into Syria, and played a key role in establishing the ISI presence in the war-torn country.

Syria would become a unique fighting ground for ISI in particular and Salafi-jihadi movements in general. Unlike previous warzones such as Afghanistan and Iraq, Syria would be characterized by in-group fighting and turn out to be the place where previous ideological divergences would create bloody conflict among Salafi-jihadi groups. It would also be the place where Al-Zarqawi's line of thought would split from and gain the upper hand in the Salafi-jihadi circles over the Al-Qaeda Core. ISI was a predominantly Iraqi phenomenon, and this is also true to a certain extent for ISIS. The identity of the group came from Iraq, and the Iraqis always maintained their superiority in the decision-making mechanisms of ISI. However, Syria was the place where ISI experienced its full recovery and energized itself to achieve its goals in Iraq. The failed nature of the two states enabled ISI/ISIS to expand in a rapid manner, attract thousands of foreign fighters and come into possession of rich financial resources.

ISI/ISIS did not start the armed insurgency in Syria; but since their arrival in the country, they have changed the parameters of the conflict on the ground by changing the balance of power as well as the matrix of the conflicting sides. In Iraq, ISI sided itself with the Sunni resentment against the central government, tried to maintain a somewhat cordial relationship with local forces, and cooperated with the other Salafi-jihadi groups, most of which were already absorbed by ISI. In other words, ISI established itself as an Iraqi armed group staffed and led by Iraqis, Salafi-jihadis as well as the Saddam era officers. However, the parameters of the conflict in Syria were different from Iraq. When ISI arrived in Syria, first through Jabhat Al-Nusra and then through Al-Baghdadi himself, there were already Syrian armed groups established by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) defectors and civilians. The Free Syrian Army, which was established by army defectors, was gaining ground and

¹⁹⁷Ibid.

attracting Syrians from all walks of life. Meanwhile, there were also other groups with Islamist, Salafi and Salafi-jihadi tendencies. While Jabhat Al-Nusra chose to collaborate mostly with the other Syrian groups, ISI/ISIS, after a short while, opted to either absorb other groups through recruitment and allegiances or fight against them. At the end of the day, ISI/ISIS has its own agenda which has always been different from those of both the Syrian armed insurgents and the regime. Therefore, ISI/ISIS followed a unique strategy by fighting against the Syrian insurgent groups mostly, and avoiding clashes with the regime unless it was for a strategically important piece of territory. A mutually beneficial *modus vivendi* between ISIS and the regime was established whereby the two parties avoided escalations against each other when possible and focused on the Syrian insurgents instead. ISI/ISIS' initial cooperation with the Syrian insurgents turned into a multi-front war against them, as a result of which the insurgents lost dearly in terms of territory, prestige and manpower. ISI/ISIS' rise in Syria also changed the international perception of the Syrian conflict so that war against ISIS gained priority over the Syrian conflict in general, which eventually led to the international community abandoning its already weak motivation to help the Syrian insurgents with their aim of toppling the Assad regime. Against this background, this chapter will analyze the transformation of ISIS by focusing on the group's encounter and clashes with the Syrian armed opposition, and its complex and covert ties with the Assad regime.

6.1. The Encounter between ISI/ISIS and The Syrian Insurgents

The beginning of the armed insurgency in Syria posed both an opportunity and a challenge for ISI. Although it was an opportunity for ISI to expand its activities in to the neighboring country in which it previously had a network and even ties with the regime officers, it also meant that ISI, which was recovering from the fight with the *Sahwa* forces, had to divide its manpower between Iraq and Syria. As the clashes started in Syria between the insurgents and the government forces, a discussion around the necessity of going to Syria to fight against the regime also erupted. A majority of ISI militants were for fighting

in Syria, while the ISI leadership were against it due to the concern that division of manpower between Syria and Iraq might weaken ISI's operational capacity in Iraq. At that time, the leadership even threatened those advocating a presence in Syria with ostracism and punishment. However, as the clashes in Syria started to expand and deepen, it became clear that it was almost impossible to prevent the militants from joining the jihad in Syria. With this understanding in mind, Hajj Bakr went to Al-Baghdadi with a new formulation. According to this formulation, a certain number of non-Iraqis inside ISI would be dispatched to Syria with a Syrian commander leading them.¹⁹⁸ The reason for some of the ISI militants' insistence on joining the jihad in Syria was not only to fight against the regime in solidarity with the Syrian insurgents. They also thought that they could have more room for themselves in Syria, as some of them were already fed up with the domination of a small group of Iraqis inside ISI. One of the sources of discontent for them was that ISI was dominated by a small group of Iraqis, most of which had served in the Iraqi army during the Saddam era and who had been ruling ISI with sugar-coated nationalism. The priority of the ISI leadership, on the other hand, was to prevent the Iraqis departure to Syria to preserve the Iraqi identity of ISI.¹⁹⁹

Al-Baghdadi agreed to this plan and dispatched a group, mostly of Syrians, led by a graduate of Camp Bucca, Abu Muhammad Al-Golani, to Syria with 180 thousand dollars in cash²⁰⁰, where they established Jabhat Al-Nusra and attracted foreign Salafi-jihadis from North Africa, the Gulf as well as from Europe. In addition to Al-Golani, Salih Al-Hamawi, Abu Malek Al-Talli and Abu Julaybib Al-Urduni played important roles in the establishment of Al-Nusra. Jabhat Al-Nusra consolidated its power, expanded its activities in Syria thanks to the experienced fighters inside its ranks as well as its financial sources and started to enjoy a certain level of independence from ISI. This quest for independence inevitably created tension between Al-Nusra and the ISI leadership in Iraq, at least in words in the beginning. One of Al-Baghdadi's concerns was that new recruits coming from abroad were joining Al-Nusra without pledging their allegiance to Al-Baghdadi. This was a

¹⁹⁸ Tweets by @wikibaghdady and interviews with Muzamjeer Al-Sham and an Al-Nusra fighter who was dispatched to Syria with Abu Muhammad Al-Golani. 2 February 2016.

¹⁹⁹ Tweets by @wikibaghdady. 14 November 2015.

²⁰⁰ Interview with Muzamjeer Al-Sham

potential threat for Al-Baghdadi's authority and charisma, and Al-Baghdadi thought that Al-Golani was challenging him by trying to establish a "parallel authority" in Syria. With this concern in mind, Al-Baghdadi sent messengers to Al-Golani and asked him to declare Al-Nusra's allegiance to ISI and its leader, admitting that Al-Nusra is the Syrian offshoot of ISI. Al-Golani politely refused arguing that Al-Nusra's pledge of allegiance to ISI would hurt both the rising popularity of the group in Syria and the Syrian revolution in general.²⁰¹ This was actually pointing to a clear difference between Al-Nusra and ISI, and ISIS for that matter. One of the main characteristics of Al-Nusra is that its leader is a Syrian national and the majority of its fighters are also Syrians. The same is true for ISI in Iraq. Although the ISI/ISIS line of thought rejects²⁰² the borders drawn by the Sykes-Picot Agreement²⁰³, national identities, in other words, being Syrian or Iraqi etc., has always continued to be an important dynamic in ISI/ISIS.

The confusion about the organizational ties of Al-Nusra with ISI derives from the dispute about the ISI-Al-Qaeda relationship. This confusion played out in the earlier days of the disagreement between ISI and Jabhat Al-Nusra, and made it very difficult for the outside observers to make sense of the situation on the ground. As mentioned in the previous chapter, ISI was born out of a merger of several Salafi-jihadi groups based in Iraq, including the AQI. The Al-Zarqawi legacy gradually overshadowed other Salafi-jihadi groups in Iraq, establishing its dominance over them via mergers. Although the AQI was part of ISI, and its leader Abu Ayyub Al-Masri pledged allegiance to the newly established ISI and Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi on 10 November 2006, the type of relationship between Al-Qaeda Core, and its leaders Osama Ben Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri, with ISI had been unclear as there was no formal allegiance submitted by ISI to the Al-Qaeda Core.²⁰⁴ This ambivalence persisted in the earlier days of ISI's entrance to Syria, and the issue would only crystalize when ISI/ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra parted their ways organizationally. In this sense, one could argue that although Al-Baghdadi sent Al-Golani

²⁰¹ Interviews with Al-Nusra members Abu Muhammad and Abu Khalid over Skype. 13 January 2016.

²⁰² Al-Adnani E. "فذرهم وما يفترون", Al-Furqan Institution. 19 June 2013, <https://archive.org/details/Zarhum.Adnani>

²⁰³ One should note here that the borders that ISI/ISIS rejects, especially the one between Iraq and Syria, have nothing to do with the map created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

²⁰⁴ Lister C., The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction, p. 16

to Syria to form Jabhat Al-Nusra, Al-Golani's loyalty remained with the Al-Qaeda Core and its current leader Al-Zawahiri. ISI, on the other hand, claimed ownership over the Al-Nusra enterprise in Syria, and when ISI leaders came to an understanding that Al-Nusra's loyalty lay elsewhere, ISI divided the ranks of Al-Nusra by recruiting its militants, capturing territory controlled by them, and diverting incoming foreign Salafi-jihadis away from Al-Nusra.

The period after Al-Nusra's refusal of subordination to ISI was characterized by Al-Baghdadi's efforts to curb Al-Nusra's influence by taking issues in hand personally. When his efforts from a distance became futile, Al-Baghdadi no longer had the option of staying away from Syria physically; he decided to relocate to Syria and in this way the transformation from ISI to ISIS started. The feud which was initiated by a disagreement over the allegiance issue turned into a campaign of *takfir*, assassinations and armed clashes. Al-Baghdadi, who emphasized the Iraqi nature of ISI and tried initially to prevent ISI militants from going to Syria, passed into Syrian territory and lived in a safe house around Atmah, near the Turkish border.²⁰⁵ His passage into Syria represents one of the most critical watershed moments in the history of ISI/ISIS, as this would dramatically change both the character and scope of the group in the near future. Al-Baghdadi first tried to meet with Al-Nusra commanders in an attempt to gain their allegiance. However, Al-Golani refused to meet despite being called several times, due to his fear of assassination. Al-Baghdadi in turn sent a message to him, telling him that Al-Nusra would soon be dissolved and asking him to make the announcement of dissolution personally. Al-Golani again cold shouldered Al-Baghdadi's demand, in effect he started an open rebellion against the ISI leader who had sent him to Syria. Coming to an understanding that Al-Golani would not obey, on 9 April 2013, Al-Baghdadi declared the dissolution of Jabhat Al-Nusra and the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), officially extending ISI's activities to Syria.²⁰⁶ This expansion meant the dissolution of ISI as the new trans-border group would operate in Iraq as well as in Syria.

²⁰⁵ The sources affiliated with Jabhat Al-Nusra and Ahrar Al-Sham that this author interviewed claim that Al-Baghdadi's first residence in Syria was located in Atmah.

²⁰⁶ Text or video of declaration

The transformation from ISI to ISIS had geographical, sociological, strategic, organizational and ideological implications for the group, which previously operated solely in Iraq with only sleeping cells and safe houses abroad. They were definitely not strangers to the Syrian territory as Syria was their gateway during the invasion years in Iraq. The border towns such as Al-Bukamal were laden with safe houses which organized transfer of people, arms and goods into Iraq. ISI had long pursued a project of Iraqization during its recovery period following the clashes with *Sahwa* forces. Iraqization became one of the most efficient strategies for ISI to reclaim its societal base in Iraq and transform the group, with the help of the Saddam era officers, from a make-shift organization into a professional body. However, Syria added a new geographical and sociological dimension to ISIS' power game. Despite similarities, especially the ongoing chaos in both countries, Syria was a different setting. Its religious/sectarian fabric, international involvement and balance of power between conflicting sides were all different. Unlike Iraq, ISIS could not position itself as the champion of the Sunnis in Syria; therefore, it was difficult for them to muster support from the local people. When ISIS turned its aggression against the Syrian insurgents, it left no room for the Syrian people who inevitably came to the understanding that ISIS was a foreign element with an anti-revolutionary agenda.

The transformation from ISI to ISIS was not merely a name change. It also had strategic and organizational implications for ISIS, which now openly started to operate in two adjacent countries. The declaration of ISIS established the group as a trans-border organization which had to set up a new structure in Syria, make sure that this new structure worked in harmony with the one in Iraq, while maintaining everyone's loyalty to the leader Al-Baghdadi. This required the careful planning and creation of a new scheme of duties and responsibilities as well as a new bureaucracy and military personnel to maintain military, financial and social operations in both countries. The size of the ISIS elite remained almost the same, but the area of ISIS' operations expanded. Therefore, the key figures from Al-Baghdadi's close circle were divided between Iraq and Syria, people like Hajj Bakr, Abu Ali Al-Anbari and Abu Muslim Al-Turkmani passed into Syria to represent Al-Baghdadi to varying degrees. Expansion in to Syria also introduced more foes for ISIS, necessitating a

new integrated military strategy against local and international actors with stakes in Iraq and Syria.

Declaration of ISIS and its activities in Syria would also have ideological implications for the group, as it radically changed the nature of its relations with other Salafi-jihadi groups in particular and other Muslims in general. The ideological differences among the Salafi-jihadi movement took a concrete form and turned into a violent conflict. The rivalry and clashes between ISIS and Al-Nusra, especially, embodied the ideological rift between Al-Zarqawi's and Bin Laden's approaches. ISIS' violent strategy against the Syrian insurgents also mutated the group's understanding of the near enemy, which Al-Zarqawi and his successors used to describe non-Islamic regimes, Shiites and their collaborators living in the Muslim countries. With ISIS, the definition of the near enemy was expanded and included almost anyone who refuses to pledge allegiance to Al-Baghdadi. This list included Jabhat Al-Nusra and other Salafi-jihadi and Islamist groups in Syria.

With the declaration of ISIS, the fighters previously affiliated with ISI and AQI were divided into three categories: those pledging allegiance to Al-Baghdadi, those loyal to Al-Golani, and the undecided. Al-Baghdadi excommunicated those fighters who did not pledged allegiance to him and declared that they would all be killed. Meanwhile ISIS followed a bloody strategy towards Al-Nusra and to this end, ISIS attacked strategic locations controlled by Al-Nusra, capturing ammunition and other military equipment, while at the same time starting an assassination campaign against Al-Nusra leaders. Al-Golani knew that he was the main target of this assassination campaign; therefore, he did not lose anytime and appealed to the Al-Qaeda Leader Al-Zawahiri to find a resolution for the ongoing attacks. This appeal would also carry the brawl between Al-Baghdadi and Al-Golani to a new level. In responding to Al-Golani's appeal, Al-Zawahiri said in a letter that ISI should operate in Iraq while Al-Nusra continue its operations in Syria, both sides are equally responsible for the current tension, and both of them made a mistake for not

consulting with the Al-Qaeda Core beforehand.²⁰⁷ This letter can be considered as the moment when the ties between Al-Qaeda Core and ISIS were severed triggering armed clashes between the two groups. This split had already existed at an ideological level between the Al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden lines of thought;²⁰⁸ however, this split was not a mere ideological divergence and had strong implications for both sides. ISIS considered Al-Zawahiri's letter as Al-Qaeda's siding with Al-Nusra in this brawl, and found Al-Zawahiri's statements regarding the geographical separation of Syria and Iraq as a sign of his acquiescence to the Sykes-Picot Agreement.²⁰⁹

Al-Zawahiri wrote another letter in May 2013 to prevent escalation between ISIS and Al-Nusra, and appointed Abu Khalid Al-Suri, a well-known Syrian Salafi-jihadi who previously worked with Osama Bin Laden, as a mediator. Al-Suri is a senior Salafi-jihadi, who after fighting in Afghanistan, returned to Syria, where he was arrested and prisoned in the notorious Sednaya prison. Al-Suri's mediation attempts failed mostly due to the fact that from the beginning ISIS did not accept his role. Less than a year later Al-Suri was killed most probably by ISIS, following an order by one of the shadiest figures in ISIS Abu Ubeyde Al-Magribi. It is argued that Al-Magribi was later also executed by ISIS, although several militants from Aleppo as well as Muzamjeer Al-Sham claim that Al-Magribi left Syria and is currently living abroad, most probably in England.²¹⁰ The next person to try to make peace between Al-Nusra and ISIS was the famous Salafi-jihadi ideologue Abdullah Muhammad Al-Muheysni, who came forward with an offer to establish a joint religious court to decide on the disputes between the two groups.²¹¹ When his initiative also failed, the gap between the two groups kept widening and it became clear that armed clashes between them were imminent and unavoidable. Abu Khalid Al-Suri argued that the culprit for the failure of mediation efforts were the infiltrators from foreign intelligence services into groups like ISIS, which are dominated by foreign fighters. He said "unless proven

²⁰⁷For the text of letter see: <http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/710586-ayman-zawahiri.html#document/p1> Also, Al-Zawahiri, E. الظواهري يأمر دولة العراق والشام بالانسحاب من سوريا. 8 November 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTP_lfV1foU

²⁰⁸ For further discussion, see: McCants. *The ISIS Apocalypse*

²⁰⁹ Al-Adnani. "فذرهم وما يفترون."

²¹⁰ Interviews with Muzamjeer Al-Sham and fighters from Asifat Al-Shimal.

²¹¹ El-Muheysni, A.M., ألا هل بلغت. <http://www.arahmah.com/arabic/ala-hl-bllght-byan-d-abdallh-al-mhysny-an-mbadrt-al-amt.html>

otherwise, all foreign fighters are potential infiltrators sent by foreign intelligence services.” In other words, he claimed that ISIS’ entry into the Syria scene where it turned most of its activity against the Syrian insurgents was the work of intelligence agencies and ISIS was used to divide and conquer the Syrian insurgents.²¹² There are indeed many claims regarding the link between ISIS and intelligence agencies, especially Syrian, Russian, Iranian and even Israeli; however, it is understandable that because of the nature of the issue, it is almost impossible to establish the links and substantiate the claims. Yet many actors on the ground acknowledge that ISIS is a highly infiltrated group, with many intelligence agencies having their informants inside the group, some of whom are influential in the ISIS’ decision-making mechanisms. Even ISIS admits these infiltrations, albeit rarely, and executes suspects publicly. This is of course not peculiar to ISIS alone. Groups with foreign fighters in their ranks are more prone to infiltration by intelligence agencies than others. To prevent such infiltration, Salafi-jihadi groups use a strict *tazkiya* (reference) system as a method of security clearance for the new recruits. What makes ISIS peculiar in this case, however, is that ISIS considers itself a state not an armed group; therefore, its reference system is looser than the other Salafi-jihadi groups, in order to attract as many people as possible to the vast territory it controls. Among some notable names listed by various actors on the ground as well-known infiltrators in ISIS are: Muhammad Rafi, who is the man in charge of security matters in Deir ez-Zor; Abu Musa Al-Ansari, who is Rafi’s counterpart in Tabqa; Abu Usama Al-Maghribi, who led ISIS’ security service in Aleppo; and Abu Ahmed Al-Havvut, the Assad regime’s contact person inside ISIS.²¹³

After the failure of the mediation efforts, when ISIS was trying to dominate the battle field especially in Northern Syria, Hajj Bakr, the right-hand man of Al-Baghdadi, was killed by the Syrian insurgents in clashes near Tal Rifaat in January 2014. Hajj Bakr was replaced by another Iraqi officer, Abu Ali Al-Anbari. Immediately after the death of Hajj Bakr, ISIS changed its strategy and turned completely against the Syrian insurgents,

²¹² Interview with Abu Khalid Al-Suri

²¹³ Interview with Muzamjeer Al-Sham, Idres Raed of Faylaq Al-Sham, Abu Ubeyde from Al-Jabhat Al-Shamiya. Also see "مخابرات الأسد توجه داعش في حلب؟". *El-Asr*. 10 December 2015. <http://alacr.me/articles/view/16733>

targetting the principal leaders and commanders with suicide bombings and VBIEDs. Three persons topped the assassination list of ISIS: Al-Nusra's Judge Abu Maria Al-Qahtani, the leader of Ahrar Al-Sham Hassan Abbud and the Salafi-jihadi ideologue Abu Abdullah Al-Muheysni.²¹⁴ The assassination attempts against these persons failed, although Abbud was killed later by an explosive device planted in the Shura Council's meeting room. Many people still claim ISIS involvement- either directly or by sharing intelligence- in the killing of Hassan Abbud as well as the leader of Liwa Al-Tawhid Abdulkader Saleh, who was killed in an airstrike by the Syrian regime.²¹⁵ In this period, ISIS opted to clash with the Syrian insurgents and avoided encounters with the Syrian regime whenever possible. ISIS's encounter with the Syrian insurgents started with efforts in receiving their allegiances, but continued with a widespread *takfir* campaign, which was a license to kill, against those who refused to submit their allegiances. ISIS, in this period, strengthened their ranks with the participation of the groups and militants who defected from other Salafi-jihadi groups, especially Jabhat Al-Nusra, expanded its territorial control mostly at the expense of the Syrian insurgents, and prioritized its fight against the insurgents over the regime forces. The coming days would witness fierce fighting between ISIS and the Syrian insurgents.

6.2.The Evolution of the Clashes Between ISIS and the Syrian Insurgents

ISIS' entry to Syria and its transformation from an Iraq-based group into a group with territorial claims in Syria caused a paradigm shift in the evolution of the conflict in the country. As will be discussed later, ISIS added a new distinct aspect to the Syrian conflict which had previously been simply composed of two parties: the regime and its international backers versus the insurgents and their international backers. ISIS differed essentially from the other two rivals with its unique agenda of expansion and ultimate aim of establishing a trans-border caliphate. ISIS was a unique addition to the conflict because unlike the other two sides, it had territorial claims in both Syria, Iraq and beyond; it fought against both combatants although prioritizing the fight against the insurgents. Its endgame, a caliphate,

²¹⁴ Tweets by @wikibaghdady

²¹⁵ Interviews with members of Asifat Al-Shimal and Liwa Al-Tawhid.

rejected the existing state structure in Syria, in contrast to both the regime and the insurgents who have been fighting to take control of the existing state structure within its boundaries. Therefore, it would be wrong and misleading to analyze ISIS under the pre-existing categories in Syria, as ISIS have neither fought to bring about a revolution nor to suppress revolutionary movement in Syria. ISIS is a group which tried to establish its own unique state in Iraq, Syria and beyond, prioritized its structure in Iraq, and used its enterprise in Syria to consolidate its structure in Iraq. Hence, ISIS' entry to Syria with its own distinct agenda forced the Syrian insurgents to open a new front (Insurgents vs. ISIS) besides the one against the regime (Regime vs. ISIS), drained insurgents' human resources, ammunition and fighting capacity, and therefore considerably weakened the insurgents.

ISIS showed a great performance in attracting new foreign fighters, absorbing the groups with a significant number of foreign fighters, and using these new recruits efficiently in the battlefield. For example, after submitting his allegiance to Al-Baghdadi, the leader of Jaysh Al-Muhajereen wa'Al-Ansar²¹⁶, Omar Al-Shishani, became the governor of a large territory including Aleppo, Idlib and Latakia.²¹⁷ ISIS' leverage over foreign fighters put Jabhat Al-Nusra, which had scores of foreign fighters in its ranks, in a very difficult position. Al-Nusra lost a lot of its fighters and a good portion of territory to ISIS, and this forced Al-Nusra to transform itself into a group with a stronger Syrian identity. Al-Nusra had previously followed a policy of ambiguity with regards to its ties with Al-Qaeda. However, in this period, Al-Nusra started to acknowledge its ties with Al-Qaeda to survive in the fight and rivalry against ISIS by getting financial and human support from Al-Qaeda Core. Al-Nusra became more Syrian than before with the defection of foreign fighters to ISIS, and its new character ironically helped the group to gain a hold in certain segments of the Syrian society. Ahrar Al-Sham's support to Al-Nusra during this period was also invaluable. Ahrar Al-Sham supported Al-Nusra both financially and militarily in the latter's rivalry against ISIS to achieve two goals: First, to divert incoming foreign fighters away from ISIS, channeling them toward Al-Nusra; Second, to prevent total collapse of Al-

²¹⁶ Joscelyn T. Chechen-led group swears allegiance to head of Islamic State of Iraq and Sham. *The Long War Journal*. 27 November 2013. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/11/muhajireen_army_swea.php

²¹⁷ Caillet R. The Islamic State: Leaving al-Qaeda Behind. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. 27 December 2013. <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54017>

Nusra, which was one of the few groups on the ground that had experience and devotion to fight against ISIS.²¹⁸ Al-Nusra survived this difficult period thanks to the support coming from Al-Qaeda Core and Ahrar Al-Sham, and continued to be one of the most effective fighting forces in Syria.

Meanwhile, ISIS expanded its militant pool mostly thanks to the defections from Al-Nusra and other Salafi-Jihadi groups in Syria, and began its bloody fight for territory against the Syrian insurgents concentrating on two methods. First of all, ISIS took control of sways of territory without fighting through mass participation of various groups into their. ISIS received allegiances from a number of tribes and Salafi-jihadi militants especially in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Aleppo, and thereby expanded both its militant pool and territorial control. In Deir ez-Zor, groups with tribal affiliations such as Tajammu Jun Al-Sham, Al-Mutasem Billah, Jundullah, Liwa Khalid Bin Walid²¹⁹; in Raqqa, tribes such as Afadilah, Breij, Ujail, Boujaber, Al-Sabha²²⁰ either merged with ISIS or subordinated themselves to the organization. After these mergers or declarations of support, ISIS captured the strategic border town of Al-Qaim securing a strategic route between Syria and Iraq.²²¹ When tribes, such as Al-Shaitat, opposed ISIS and refused to submit their allegiance to Al-Baghdadi, members of their tribe were massacred. Secondly, ISIS started an extensive military campaign against the Syrian insurgents on several fronts simultaneously, targeting the insurgents in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Hums, Haseke and Raqqa.

When one lists the territory captured by ISIS from the Syrian insurgents using both methods mentioned above up till March of 2016 and compares this data with the ISIS territory captured from the regime in the same time period, a striking asymmetry is revealed. As of March 2016, ISIS controlled 1274 towns and villages throughout Syria (See Appendix-1). Out of 1274, ISIS captured 1115 of them from the Syrian insurgents, while only 159 of them were captured from the regime. Making a rough approximation, therefore, ISIS captured around 88% of the territory it controls from the Syrian insurgents. When we look at the break down in provinces, ISIS captured the territory in Aleppo, Deraa, Deir Ez-

²¹⁸Interviews with Abu Abdullah Al-Hamawi and Muzamjeer Al-Sham.

²¹⁹العشائر بوابة التمرد "داعش" ودير الزور: العشاير بوابة التمرد. *El-Arabi El-Cedid*. 15 August 2015. <http://bit.ly/1qKViHy>

²²⁰عشائر سورية بايعة "داعش" وأخرى عراقية ستحاربه. *Orient News*. 14 July 2014. <http://bit.ly/1OZ5GqK>

²²¹Hosken. Empire of Fear. p.217

Zor, and Raqqa almost completely from the insurgents; while in Hums, Hama and Suwaida, it fought against the regime and gained territory directly from the regime. Another interesting statistic here is that almost 89% of ISIS' territorial losses were caused by clashes with the YPG, while the regime recaptured around 10% of the territory lost by ISIS.

Table 2: Raqqa

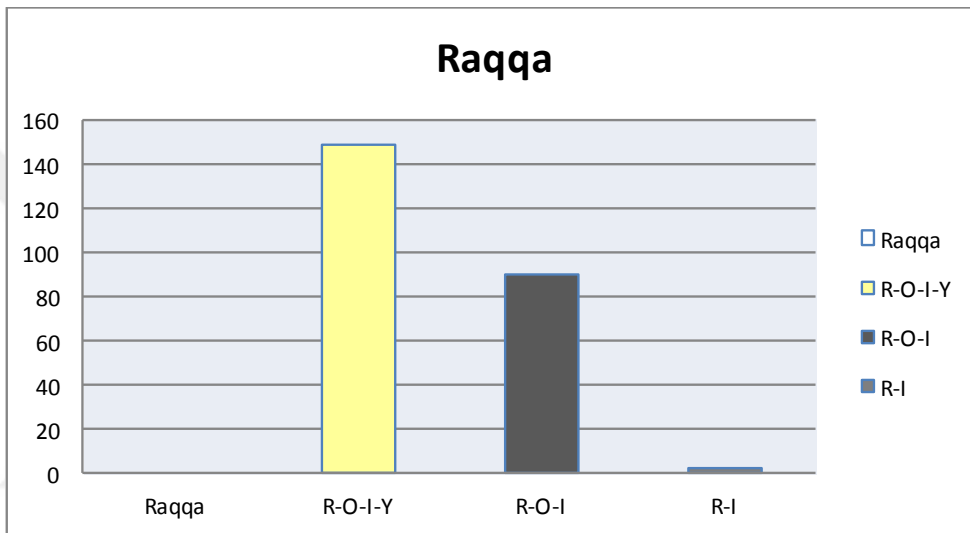


Table 3: Aleppo

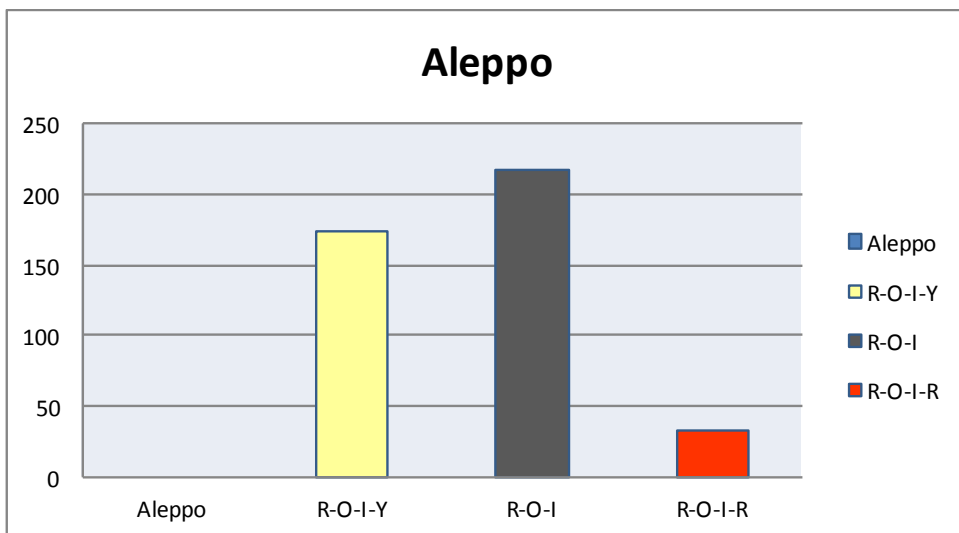


Table 4: Deir ez-Zor

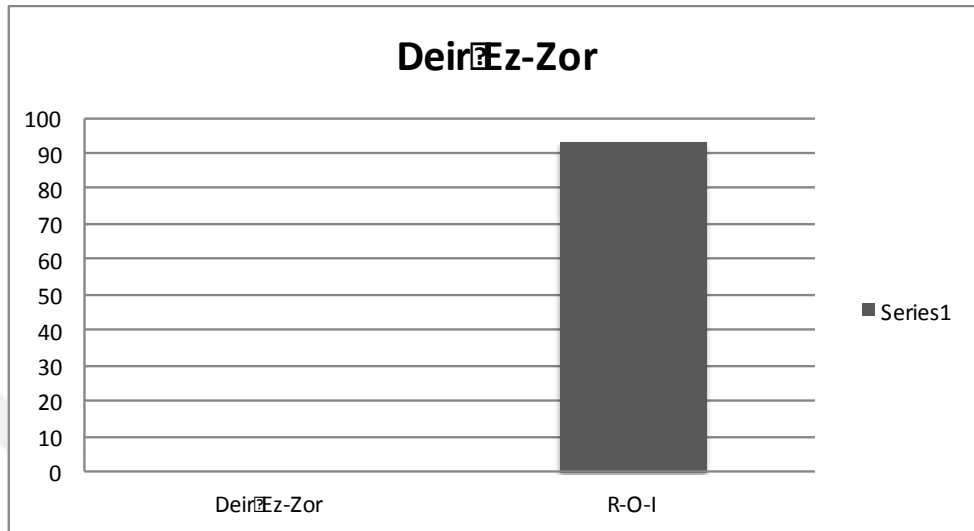


Table 5: Haseke

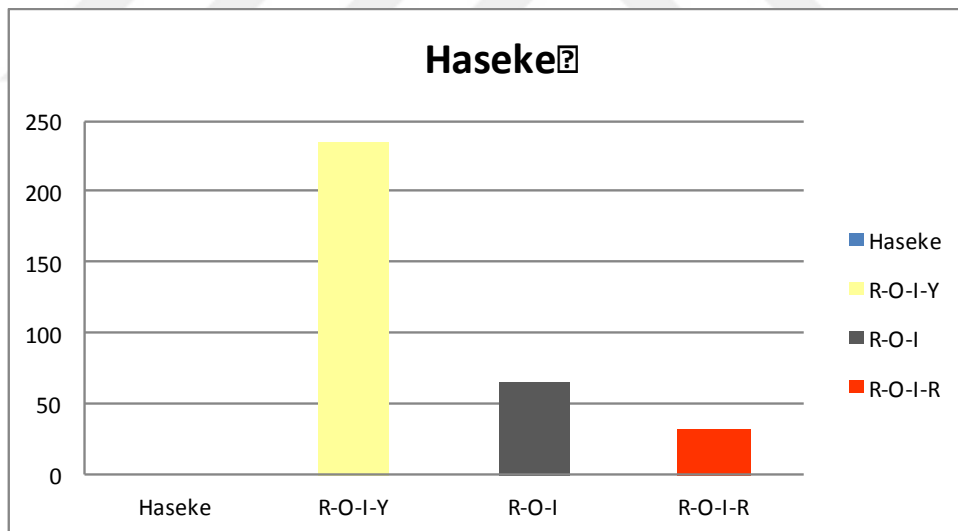


Table 6: Humus

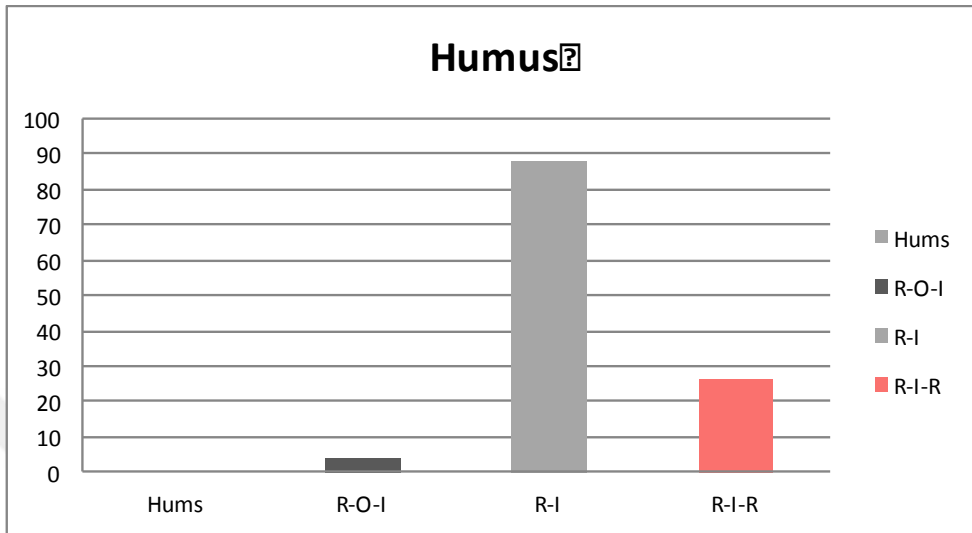
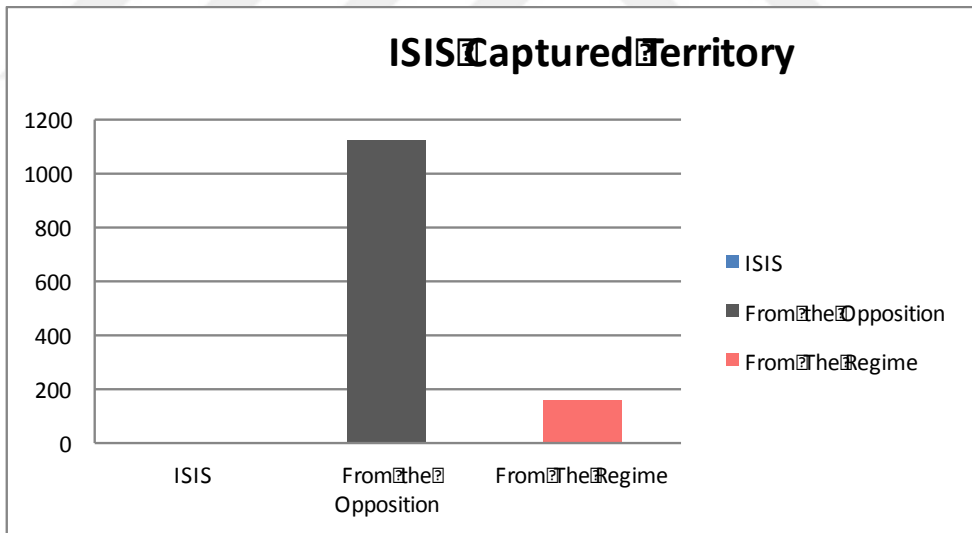


Table 7: The Territory Captured by ISIS



These graphics demonstrate quite clearly that ISIS has been hostile to the Syrian insurgents and pursued a unique agenda of capturing as much territory as possible for future claims on statehood. The graphics also indicate that ISIS changed its policy to fight primarily against the Syrian insurgents shortly after its arrival in Syria, so weakening them considerably and changing the power balance on the ground at the expense of the

insurgents. ISIS' focus on the insurgents rather than the regime derived mostly from strategic calculations. On the one hand, the insurgents who were underequipped and mostly inexperienced were an easy target for ISIS. The regime, however, could be a riskier choice for ISIS' plans for territorial expansion due to its regular army with better means and continuing support from Russia, Iran and its proxies. On the other hand, ISIS thought that the defeat of the insurgents could empower them by attracting more recruits to themselves from the insurgent groups. In other words, at least some insurgents, unlike the regime forces, were considered by ISIS as potential recruits and they expected that disillusioned fighters would join ISIS, turning the group into the center of gravity in the Syrian conflict.

While ISIS was pursuing military aggression towards the insurgents, there was a hot debate among other insurgent groups, especially those which contain Salafi-jihadis and foreign fighters in their ranks, about the permissibility of clashes against ISIS. Although all groups agreed on the harm that ISIS did to the Syrian revolution and the unacceptability of its methods, the debate continued around whether it was permissible by Islam to fight against fellow Muslims regardless of their methods. In other words, though considering ISIS as a harmful group, they still looked for religious legitimacy to fight against it. The insurgents had a high level of skepticism about ISIS, believing that it was an invention of intelligence agencies since the early arrival of Al-Baghdadi in Syria.²²² The problem was in finding a religious scholar who could issue a fatwa on the permissibility of fighting against ISIS. Many scholars had yet to learn what kind of a group ISIS was and what they were after in Syria. Even those who had previous experience with the group were either too afraid to issue such a fatwa or still undecided about the nature and intention of the group. As ISIS' aggression against the insurgents continued and the number of casualties increased, fatwas by Syrian scholars started to be issued in rapid succession. Osama Al-Rifai, the head of Syrian Islamic Scholars Association, argued in his fatwa that "ISIS does not fear Allah and spills the blood of Muslims which is a path towards kufr."²²³ A well-known scholar among Salafi-jihadi circles, Abu Basir Al-Tartousi, on the other hand,

²²² Interviews with insurgents from Nur Al-Din Zanki Movement, Fatih Sultan Mehmet Battalion and Liwa Al-Tawheed.

²²³ رئيس رابطة علماء الشام : أمراء تنظيم الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام لا يخافون الله (2016, Kasim 16) <http://www.syria-press.co/article.php?id=2516>

declared that “ISIS is a *khawarij* organization and fighting against them is considered as jihad.”²²⁴The Religious Council of the Islamic Front issued a fatwa along the same lines in March 2014 and stated that ISIS is a *khawarij* group and fighting against them is *wajib* (necessary).²²⁵ Regardless of the fatwas issued during this period and the solidity of their arguments, it was quite difficult to persuade fighters, especially those with organizational ties with Al-Qaeda in Iraq, to fight against ISIS. Abu Khalid Al-Suri was one of the commanders on the ground who saw the danger ISIS posed for the Syrian revolution in the earlier phases. He complained that even some of his men refused to clash with ISIS, often defecting from his battalion or staying at the head-quarters to avoid clashes. With the increase of ISIS’ attacks against the insurgent groups and assassinations against insurgent commanders, the divide between ISIS and the insurgent groups deepened, laying the ground for a protracted conflict between the two.

An important point that should be raised here is that the concept of “the war against ISIS”, which was internationalized in September 2014 with the conflict in Kobane, was nothing new for the Syrian insurgents who had been fighting actively against ISIS since the Spring of 2013. In other words, the insurgents started the war on ISIS with their own capabilities and limited international support in mid-2013, risking their fight against the Assad regime; while the international community turned against ISIS militarily only starting from September 2014. ISIS started its military operations against the Syrian insurgents in Raqqa and Aleppo in July 2013, capturing an arms depot owned by the Free Syrian Army in Atmah on 13 July 2013.²²⁶ In August, ISIS attacked Ahfad Al-Rasoul Brigades in Raqqa, and people from Idlib to Raqqa began demonstrating against ISIS. In December, ISIS turned towards the strategic border post, Bab Al-Hawa, and attacked the insurgent groups there to take control of the post.²²⁷

During this period, ISIS gained the upper hand over the insurgent groups for five main reasons. First, ISIS militants’ superior military experience due to their long resume of

²²⁴ بيان للشيخ أبي بصير الطرطوسي حول ما يجري من اقتتال بين جماعة الدولة ومجاهدي الشام (2014, Şubat 1)

<http://bit.ly/1TFRLVn>

²²⁵ من يعيق الجهاد ضد نظام الأسد؟ <http://bit.ly/1hbuSqq>

²²⁶ داعش "تهاجم مستودعات للأركان و"الإسلامية" تنفذ الموقف" (2013, Temmuz 12) *Zaman*

alWasl. <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/43979.html>

²²⁷ النزاع بين اركان الحر والجبهة الإسلامية وداعش <http://bit.ly/1XUSPaT>

fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. Experience at that time was a rare commodity in the battle ground as most Syrians had been civilians who took up arms only after the beginning of the armed insurgency. The number of army defectors was still low when compared with the civilians fighting under various groups in Syria. The groups interviewed by this author have often complained about the inexperience of their men in fighting which usually made them an inefficient fighting force on the ground.²²⁸The second reason for their success was ISIS' absorption of other Salafi-jihadi groups and its attraction for foreign fighters. Many groups with differing sizes joined the ranks of ISIS, and Jabhat Al-Nusra took the biggest blow during this period. Consequently, many of the competitors on the ground were either weakened through defections or disappeared completely effectively being absorbed by ISIS which became the main destination of the incoming foreign fighters, again damaging groups that depended on foreign fighters. Thirdly, working in favor of ISIS was a lack of religious motivation for fighting against them in the earlier phases of the clashes. As mentioned previously, the insurgents had a difficult time in persuading their men Islamically about the permissibility of fighting against ISIS. While the groups aligned with the FSA did better in this respect, those groups with Salafi-jihadis and Islamists had serious doubts about the matter. ISIS benefited greatly from this indecisiveness and expanded its control in Syria at the expense of the Syrian insurgents. Fourth, the insurgents' fight on two simultaneous fronts, against both ISIS and the regime, undermined their effectiveness. As ISIS started military aggression towards the insurgents, the insurgents had to divide their manpower, ammunition and strategy between two fronts. This apparently benefited ISIS as well as the regime since both actors focused on their fight against the insurgents while the insurgents did not have the luxury to focus only on one front. This also constitutes a general trend in the Syrian conflict in that the insurgents have been forced to fight on several fronts simultaneously against ISIS, the YPG, the regime and its international backers. Finally the fifth factor, the fractured nature of the Syrian insurgents. Since the beginning of the armed insurgency, tactical, ideological and political divisions have prevailed among the insurgent groups. They therefore could not face the threat of ISIS as one unified block and differed in their priorities and end games. The defectors from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), including

²²⁸Interviews with Fatih Sultan Mehmet Brigades and Asifat Al-Shimal.

high-level officers, formed the Free Syrian Army. Independent units established by locals with varying political and ideological stances have also taken their places in the matrix of the fighting forces in Syria. With the arrival of Salafi-jihadi groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the formation of moderate Jihadi battalions such as Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, and Liwa al-Tawheed, the military dynamics on the ground have become even more complicated, and disagreements and even clashes have occurred among different pro-opposition military groups. Due to these divisions, ISIS found the opportunity to advance in Syria with lightning speed; and by February 2014, ISIS transformed into a sizable group with an estimated ten thousand militants in its ranks.²²⁹

6.3. The Mutualistic Relationship between ISIS and the Assad Regime

Syria was not an unfamiliar terrain for the Salafi-jihadists; and both homegrown Salafi-jihadists and foreign fighters had a presence in Syria. As was often complained of by American and Iraqi officials during the invasion years, Syria was a gateway for the Salafi-jihadis in their effort to reach Iraq, and the Syrian intelligence played a key role in organizing their passages into Iraq. This role varied from tolerating their recruitment and organizational activities inside Syria to actively assisting in their transition into the country.²³⁰ Although the Assad regime officially denied any sort of involvement with the Salafi-jihadis during those years, many officials who have defected from the Assad regime have confirmed the link between these groups and the Syrian intelligence services, therefore this link is beyond speculation. The regime had two main aims in mind by helping the AQI. First, it wanted to pressurize the Bush administration to focus on Iraq rather than Syria, and use the Salafi-jihadis as a bargaining chip against the Americans. Second, it aimed to divert Salafi-jihadis' attention and activities away from Syria to avoid a Salafi-jihadi insurgency inside Syria.²³¹ The key person who was then overseeing the Salafi-jihadi

²²⁹Knickmeyer, E. Al-Qaeda Disavows Rebel Group Fighting Syrian Regime. (2016, Şubat 3) *Wall Street Journal*. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304851104579361041928884318>

²³⁰ The Syrian regime's role in the Salafi-jihadi activity during the Iraq War years was affirmed by many interviewees who had fought with the Salafi-jihadi groups using Syria as a springboard to Iraq.

²³¹Weiss & Hassan. ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror.p.102

activity and Syrian intelligence's assistance to them had been none other than Bashar Assad's brother-in-law, Asaf Shawkat, who was killed by a bomb planted in the meeting room of the security cabinet in Damascus in 2012. A US State Department cable dispatched in 2009 notes that Shawkat knew and turned a blind eye to the activities of one Abu Ghadiya, who was managing the Salafi-jihadi traffic between the Syrian border town of Al-Bukamal and Iraqi border town of Al-Qaim. The cable contains the minutes of a meeting between the Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Maliki and the CENTCOM Commander General Petraeus; and notes further that Shawkat's involvement was known to Damascus, and Shawkat was operating on Assad's watch.²³² An eye witness, Rashad Al-Kattan, a security risk analyst and a fellow with the Centre for Syrian Studies at the University of St Andrews, recalls the Salafi-jihadi traffic during those years:

“My family's house is near the US embassy in Damascus. A few months after the invasion, I started seeing the large green buses used for public transport parked outside the Iraqi embassy, which is opposite the US embassy. It continued for some time but the buses moved to Sumariéh coach station, on the outskirts of the capital, apparently after the Americans complained it was happening under their watch, literally.”²³³

This notorious link proved to be beneficial for the regime with the start of the armed insurgency in Syria. As the regime expanded its military operations first to suppress peaceful demonstrations and then quash the armed insurgency, it also followed a “smart” strategy to radicalize the ranks of the opposition. In doing this, the regime aimed to divide the armed insurgents by adding a problematic component to their ranks and also discredit them in the eyes of the international community by portraying them as radicals and itself as the defender of Syria as well as the region against radicalism. A strategically calculated step taken by the regime in this period was to announce a general amnesty and release political prisoners from the infamous Sednaya Prison, including inmates linked with the ISI/AQI. Sednaya was home to the country's political prisoners as well as a hotbed for

²³² General Petraeus' meeting with PM Maliki. 7 January 2009.

https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BAGHDAD31_a.html

²³³ Hassan Hassan, How Assad has outfoxed his foes time and again. The National. 10 July 2016.

<http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/how-assad-has-outfoxed-his-foes-time-and-again>

Salafi-jihadi radicalization similar to Camp Bucca in Iraq. The regime was keeping many Salafi-jihadis, including ISI/AQI militants whom it had helped to pass into Iraq, as prisoners in Sednaya. The names released from Sednaya would shape the future of armed insurgency in Syria as figures such as Hassan Abboud, Abu Eissa Al-Sheikh and Zahran Alloush would form the biggest, moderate anti-Assad armed groups; while others would join the ranks of Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, Jabhat Al-Nusra and some later joined forces with ISIS. In other words, the amnesty had mixed results for the Assad regime. On the one hand, it enabled the creation of strong oppositional blocs against the regime. Hasan Abboud became one of the founders and leaders of the trans-province, moderate Islamist group Ahrar Al-Sham, Abu Eissa Al-Sheikh first founded the Suqour Al-Sham in Jabal Al-Zawiya region in Idlib and later merged with Ahrar Al-Sham; while Alloush led the biggest moderate Islamist insurgent group in the suburbs of Damascus, Jaysh Al-Islam. These groups have been key components of the armed insurgency since then, representing the backbone of the non-FSA armed insurgency. However, one could argue that their emergence and rise to prominence in Syria overshadowed the FSA, and the Assad regime as well as its international backers such as Iran and Russia have been portraying these groups as "terrorists" and asking the international community to add these groups to the black list. Yet, the international community has so far refused to list them as terrorist groups, although they have kept their distance from them and avoided direct support. Groups like Ahrar Al-Sham and Jaysh Al-Islam are mixed in nature and have Islamists from all spectrums in their ranks, including some Salafi-jihadis. Yet, they are Syrian groups who are usually not foreign fighter-friendly, and have deep roots in Syrian society.

On the other hand, it helped in the subsequent strengthening of Al-Nusra and ISIS. The Assad regime, with the introduction of the Salafi-jihadi component into the picture, was successful in creating question marks and raising serious concerns with regard to the opposition. The regime seized this opportunity to paint a picture of the opposition as if it was solely composed of radicals and "terrorists." In other words, the regime tried and succeeded in revolving the discussion around the AQI/ISI component, which was in fact comparably fewer in number than the mainstream armed insurgents including the moderate Islamists, and thereby tainting the image of the revolutionaries both domestically and

internationally. As Jabhat Al-Nusra gained strength and the regime's image making policy worked, the regime consolidated its power inside Syria and mustered international support. This process whereby the armed insurgency was discredited over the introduction of the Salafi-jihadi component provided the regime with three main gains in the international scene. First, it received direct military aid from countries such as Iran and Russia. Both countries have given continuous support to the regime often with the pretext of fighting against the radicals. Second, the Salafi-jihadi component created concerns and doubts about the endgame of the armed insurgency; therefore diverted the support of countries, which had previously showed their concerns about Assad's brutal crackdown, away from the insurgents. Third, it neutralized some other countries' positions with regard to the armed insurgency in Syria and turned them into passive watchers.

Domestically, the sectarian rhetoric by some of the Salafi-jihadis matched the one emanating from the cronies of the Assad regime and the incoming Shiite militias and helped the regime to consolidate its support among Alawites as well as some other minority groups, increasing their legitimacy among these groups. The regime's consolidation of power inside Syria, the foreign support flowing from Iran and Russia and the international community's reservations towards the armed insurgency reinforced the regime and prevented its immediate collapse unlike those of Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. Meanwhile, ISIS which prioritized the fight against the insurgents over the regime, contributed to the regime's survival indirectly as the intensification of the clashes between ISIS and the insurgents gave the regime the chance to fight against an embattled uprising. Additionally, the defections to and losses against ISIS caused further divisions inside the insurgent groups which again helped the regime in its fight against them and enabled it to recover some of the territory previously lost to the rebel groups. As mentioned before, ISIS' military strategy concentrated on fighting against the weakened insurgents rather than reinforced regime forces, avoiding clashes with the regime except for strategically important areas such as oil wells, refineries, power plants, ammunition depots and military bases; while escalating its attacks against the insurgents to capture territory that would establish the base for ISIS' statehood project.

The relationship between the Salafi-jihadis, therefore ISIS and the Assad regime, that dates back to the years of the US invasion in Iraq is not a secret. Nevertheless, a widespread conspiracy theory that ISIS was formed and controlled by the regime is simplistic at best. The relationship, however, has a rational, mutually beneficial nature which does not lack in armed confrontations. As described by the owner of one Syrian energy company, “This is 1920s Chicago mafia-style negotiation. You kill and fight to influence the deal, but the deal doesn’t end.”²³⁴ Although the two parties fight each other for the control of strategically important areas, both sides still think that their priorities do not lie in fighting each other and maintain some sort of a *modus vivendi* or gentlemen’s agreement in military, economic and intelligence fields. For example, the Chief State Prosecutor of Tadmur, a strategic town contested between ISIS and the regime, Muhammad Qasim Naser, told this author that the regime bought agricultural products, mostly grain, from ISIS in 2013 and 2014 through a middleman called Muhanna Al-Hassan. He also claimed that the same type of relationship continued between ISIS and the regime in the oil and arms trade; noting that, during his tenure as the Chief Prosecutor he witnessed first hand that the regime paid ISIS big sums of money for the protection of the oil fields, while regime officials were involved in the arms trade with ISIS. Naser, who worked as the Chief Prosecutor of Tadmur until 2015, also mentioned that the regime often released and sent criminals to the ISIS controlled areas in order to infiltrate into the organization and be used as informants. Another interesting piece of information he had was that the regime allowed ISIS to remove its military equipment and arms from Tadmur and transfer them to Aleppo and Raqqa, before the initiation of the operation to recapture Tadmur by the regime forces supported by Russia and Iran. He stated that ISIS evacuated certain posts before the regime’s operation started due to a pre-arrangement with the regime to avoid unnecessary clashes.²³⁵ This accusation was backed by many insurgents, who witnessed that ISIS transported its equipment from Tadmur and used them mostly against the insurgents especially on the Aleppo front.²³⁶ According to the insurgents, the regime turned a blind eye

²³⁴ Isis Inc: Syria’s ‘mafia-style’ gas deals with jihadis. *The Financial Times*. 15 October 2015. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/92f4e036-6b69-11e5-aca9-d87542bf8673.html#axzz4ALRjZyVa>

²³⁵ Interview with Muhammad Qasim Naser. 24 March 2016.

²³⁶ Interviews with insurgents from the Fath Haleb (Conquest of Aleppo) operation room.

to and even facilitated ISIS' military activities which could be used against the insurgents, avoiding clashes with ISIS on the fronts where they was fighting against the insurgents.

There is a reciprocal relationship between ISIS and the Assad regime in which both sides benefit from the activity of the other. Both sides legitimize the activities of each other and mobilize support using each other as a *raison d'etre*. One should be reminded of the fact that one of the primary reasons why the Salafi-jihadis attracted fighters from all around the world in the first place were the massacres of the Assad regime against demonstrators and insurgents in the later periods of the street protests. On the other hand, the presence of ISIS and Salafi-jihadis in Syria was among the primary reasons why Assad mustered support from the Russia-Iran-Hezbollah axis, enjoyed certain amount of legitimacy inside Syria and held on to power against all odds. It is ironic that the two sides mobilized their forces to fight each other at the beginning; however, as the character of the conflict changed on the ground, they started to realign their priorities, i.e. fighting against the insurgents. The fact that the regime's and its backers' main focus on the battlefield has been the insurgents illustrates this shift of priorities. As US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Anne W. Patterson, said almost 90% of the airstrikes carried out the regime's international backers, i.e. Russia, have been targeting the moderate opposition rather than ISIS.²³⁷ Currently, the regime-ISIS conflict is only concentrated near Tadmur as both sides want to maintain the control of, or capture oil fields in the vicinity of Tadmur; while the regime fights the insurgents in Central Aleppo, Southern Aleppo, Latakia, countryside of Hama and suburbs of Damascus.

It is safe to predict that as long as the regime and ISIS benefit from the *modus vivendi*, mutualism will characterize the nature of the relationship between the two parties. The current *modus vivendi* may transform into deeper and more extensive clashes between the two sides; however, this would require major shifts on the ground. For example, the defeat or containment of the insurgents by the regime may direct the regime's attention towards ISIS; but until then the regime would not want to risk its fight against the insurgents by allocating a good portion of its forces to the fight against ISIS. At the end of

²³⁷ *Anadolu Ajansi*. 5 November 2015. واشنطن: أكثر من 90% من الغارات الروسية استهدفت المعارضة السورية المعتدلة وليس داعش <http://goo.gl/X5ZwpZ>

the day, there are already parties on the ground that are pursuing anti-ISIS operations such as the international coalition. Unless the threat emanating from the insurgents is neutralized, the regime would want to delegate the fight against ISIS to other parties and prefer limited confrontation with ISIS.



7. Conclusion

At many levels, ISIS is a unique group that deserves deeper and more substantiated research. However, as discussed in earlier chapters, the very nature of the group, which is secretive, complex and not researcher-friendly, puts barriers between them and the researchers who want to write about it. The nature of the Syrian conflict also contributes to this conundrum as travelling to the territories controlled by ISIS is not only difficult, but also potentially fatal. Yet, as this study has demonstrated, there are still tools that one could use to overcome those difficulties. If or when the situation eventually calms down in Syria and the threat of ISIS is neutralized or contained, this researcher will hopefully have a wealth of new data to analyze the group from different perspectives. This study by no means claims to cover all aspects of ISIS, this is currently not possible. However, by utilizing research methods available, this study aims to further our understanding of ISIS as a violent non-state actor in the international system, as the most advance offshoot of Salafi-jihadism and as a unique fighting force in the Syrian conflict.

Although ISIS holds control over a considerable amount of territory and population, its sovereignty over the land and people is not uncontested; similarly, although it has a hard grip on the territory which it controls, it has not been recognized as a state by other states. The lack of full sovereignty and recognition means that despite having state-like qualities, it is not possible to categorize ISIS as a state in the realist and Westphalian sense of the word. Therefore, it would be appropriate to consider ISIS as a VNSA that is on the border of holding qualities of a state in the Westphalian sense. ISIS is arguably one of the most, if not the most, powerful VNSAs thanks to the vast amount of territory it controls, the financial resources it possesses, and the sophisticated form of governance it formed in Syria and Iraq. It is more than a terrorist organization especially because of its vast territorial control. This of course does not stop ISIS from using tactics of terrorism and acts of brute violence; the advertisement of violence and spread of fear and insecurity among opponents have been the group's principle strategy. Theoretically speaking, ISIS retains features of both insurgency groups and terrorist organizations; while it would be wrong to argue that ISIS fits perfectly under either category. ISIS is yet another example of the relation

between weak/fragile states and the emergence and rise of the VNSA. It is therefore not coincidental that ISIS emerged in Iraq and spread to Syria, both striking examples of failed states. ISIS benefited highly from the post-Arab Spring chaos, death of Osama bin Laden, the Egyptian Coup, the Syrian conflict as well as Al-Maliki's sectarian policies. When it filled the power vacuum, ISIS first posed a domestic concern but then transformed into a regional threat and finally has become a global issue.

The Salafi-jihadism is not a new phenomenon; but gained new dimensions and reached new peaks thanks to the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and expansion into Syria. ISIS parted ways with the Salafi-jihadi groups once dominated by Al-Qaeda and established itself as the strongest group ever of the Salafi-jihadism. The break from Al-Qaeda was not merely an organizational split; the pre-existing ideological differences between Al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden became crystalized and started to have bloody implications on the ground as the two factions entered into a fierce competition. ISIS took Abu Bakr Naji's Management of Savagery as a guide, and followed the stages literally explained in the book to reach the final goal of establishing a caliphate. On this path, takfirism and strong Messianism separated the group from most of the other Salafi-jihadis; as ISIS sanctioned its killings of other Muslims through extensive use of takfirism to reach the Messianic goal of the caliphate. Even though many Salafi-jihadis value the establishment of a caliphal state, similar to the one established during the lifetimes of the Guided Caliphs, all but a tiny portion of them argue that ISIS' declaration of the caliphate is legally void and does not bind the Muslims as the caliphate cannot be established by a simple declaration. In other words, the takfiri ideology of ISIS, the Messianic role it attributes to itself as well as the brute violence it has used against Muslims and non-Muslims alike has pushed even the mainstream Salafi-jihadis away from ISIS.

The Syrian crisis morphed into a proxy war starting from the early phases of the conflict; and the emergence of ISIS as an actor in Syria made the situation there even more complicated. Despite earlier collaborations with some of the armed groups in Syria, ISIS always had its own unique agenda which, unlike the Syrian insurgents, has not only been confined with the toppling of the Assad regime. ISIS attributes itself with a Messianic role of establishing a caliphate which transcends current geographical borders and state systems.

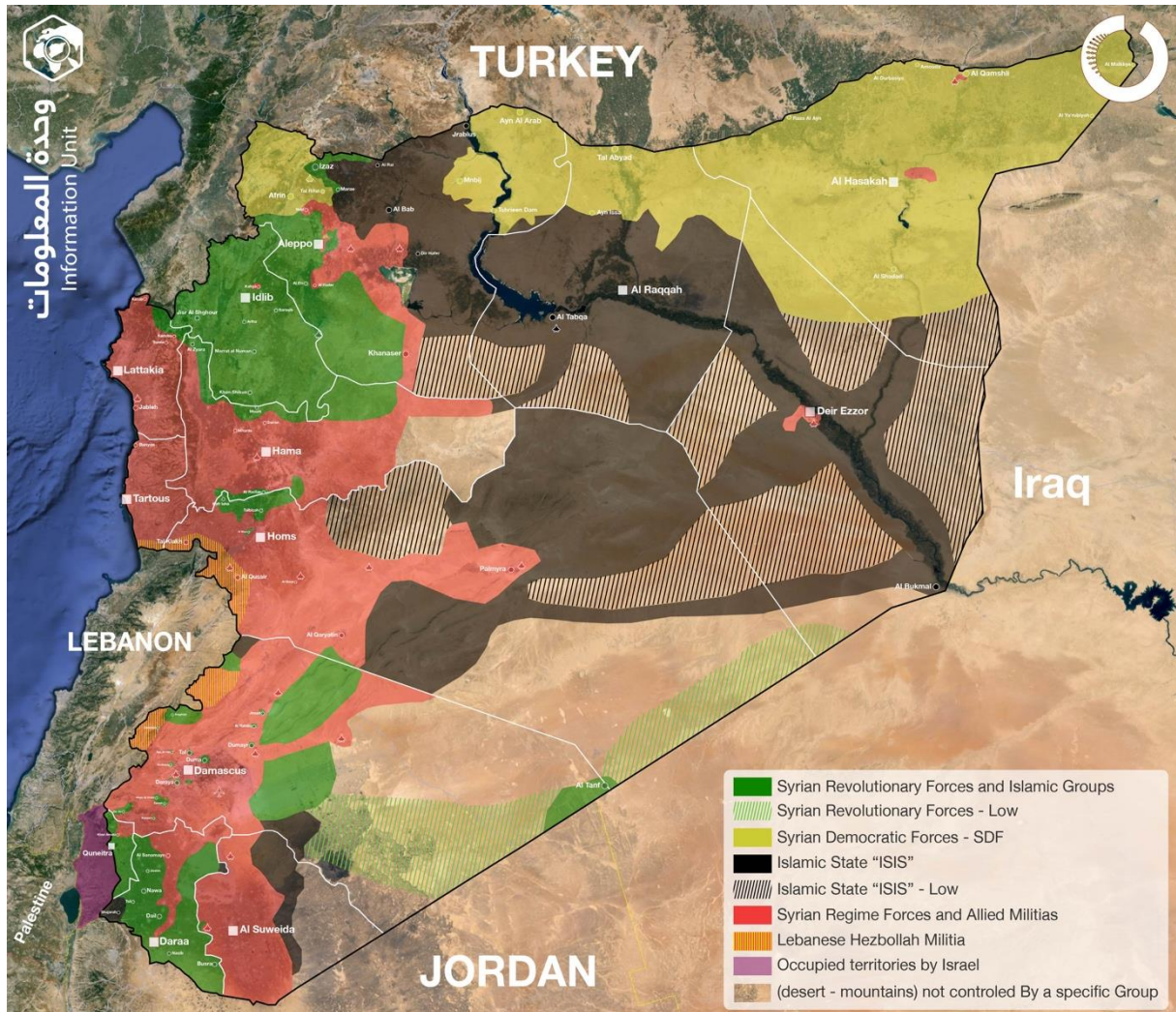
Therefore, it has never limited its planning to remain within the current borders and systems. In the black and white world of ISIS, which has strong Messianic and takfiri tones, Syrian insurgents are not much different from the Assad loyalists or the YPG militants. Any group standing between ISIS and the caliphate is deemed as an enemy to be fought. Through this understanding, as discussed in the sixth chapter, ISIS fought more against the Syrian insurgents than other groups, including the SAA and the YPG, and established its structure mostly on the territory captured from the Syrian insurgents. ISIS, therefore, cannot be categorized as a part of the Syrian insurgency by any standards; rather, it is a unique force with a separate agenda that transcends the borders and the state system of Syria.

As of April 2016, ISIS controls Kaljibrin, Kafr Kalbin, Al-Rai, Suwran, Dabiq, Al-Bab, Harbal in Northern Aleppo; Jarablus, Maskana in Eastern Aleppo; all Raqqa except northern parts; all Deir ez-Zor except the military airport and a few spots at the city center; Al-Sukhna, Jabal Shair, some parts of Tadmur, Al-Qaryateyn and Huwaysis in the east countryside of Hama; Akirbat, Suka and Salmiyya in the east countryside of Hama; some spots in the countryside of East and West Qalamun as well as Bir Kasab in the Damascus countryside; Hajar al-Aswad and the Yarmuk Camp in Damascus; and some tiny spots in Deraa. In other words, ISIS has direct or indirect territorial control over around 43% of the Syrian land. This ratio includes those territories under ISIS' sphere of influence, even though the group does not have a strong military presence. The ratio of territorial control is around 11% for the armed opposition, 14% for the YPG, and 17% for the regime forces. The ISIS belt stretches from the Iraqi border until Aleppo's north and it is able to transfer militants, ammunition and other goods as well as reinforce its units within this area. The group is particularly strong in the Iraqi-Syrian border areas up until Haseke, and connects the two countries using the border towns of Al-Bukamal and Qaim which the Salafi-jihadis have traditionally used as their main gateway between Syria and Iraq.

There are both pros and cons for ISIS in Syria; and the chaos and conflict that has been going on in Syria is to its advantage. As discussed earlier, ISIS is a group which flourishes during times of chaos and crisis; and one of the main reasons for its expansion in Syria and Iraq is the existence of failed states which became the center of social, sectarian

and ethnic warfare. The chaos enables ISIS to gain more territory and consolidate the existing ones, at the same time, creates invaluable opportunities for recruitment and arms transfers. The matrix of conflicting parties in Syria is also another point of benefit to ISIS. Since the strongest alliance on the ground- the Assad-Russia-Iran axis- does not prioritize the fight against ISIS; ISIS has the luxury to focus its fight on the other rivals, mostly the Syrian insurgents. The war-torn Syrian insurgents have been fighting on multiple fronts for years. As for the YPG/SDF, they experience structural problems despite the US aid. One of these problems is the composition of the SDF, which is dominated by the YPG. The YPG has neither political nor demographic backing in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, the heartland of ISIS. Despite tiny Arab elements inside the SDF, predominantly Arab residents of these territories do not trust the SDF because of the dominant YPG elements. This gives ISIS the opportunity to mobilize the locals against the YPG when needed. The demographic disadvantage of the YPG also brings its own risks; as the YPG leaves its own heartland in Northeastern Syria, its efficiency drops both in the north and towards the south. Hence, the YPG long resisted an operation towards Raqqa, but then started an operation after pressure from the US, only to abort it after a short while. While the YPG gains ground against ISIS thanks to the US airstrikes, the resistance capabilities of ISIS increase as the YPG attempts to move towards the south.

Figure 4: Territorial Control Map of Syria (As of August 2016)



Another one of ISIS' advantages is its core militants' messianic fervor leading to high levels of devotion and motivation. Although there have been some breakaways due to the recent losses, the core militants maintain their loyalty and devotion to the cause of ISIS. The psychological preparedness and the fighting experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, and Yemen etc. make this core group a very efficient fighting force. Thanks to its expertise in intelligence gathering, capability of tactical and strategic planning- a skill to which the Saddam-era officers contributed greatly-, and rich arms inventory, ISIS still preserves its power to resist and repel in Syria.

The methods by which the international community fights against ISIS also work to the benefit of the group, as one cannot fight against ISIS without addressing the underlying causes that created and nurtured ISIS. One of the main points that can be derived from the history of ISIS and its predecessors is that as long as oppression, sectarian politics, massacres and foreign intervention continue, ISIS and similar groups will survive albeit in different forms. These problems create the first stage of radicalization, and give ISIS the room to recruit and assimilate a disillusioned populace. Therefore, as long as the massacres of the Assad regime, the YPG's demographic engineering and the humanitarian crisis persist, radicalization, which empowers groups like ISIS, will also continue.

The greatest disadvantage of ISIS is that it does not have a societal base in Syria unlike in Iraq. Since ISIS portrayed itself as the protector of the Sunnis, formed long-term and conjectural alliances with tribes and the Saddam-era officers, and became an Iraqi group; it succeeded in creating a popular base in Iraq. The Sunnis in Iraq do not have an alternative powerful fighting force. One of the strongest ones, the Army of Naqshibandi, which has lost a lot of its strength, first cooperated with ISIS in Mosul but then parted ways. However, in Syria, ISIS is considered as a foreign element by almost every Syrian actor. Despite their effort to increase the ratio of Syrians in its ranks, around 60% of its militants in Syria are foreign fighters. The Sunnis, who are the predominant majority in Syria, do not see ISIS as their protector and ISIS only gets limited support from Syrians when it fights against the YPG. There are many armed groups that Syrians can identify with; therefore, almost none of the Syrians feel affinity to ISIS in fact many Syrians consider ISIS as a tool and invention of foreign intelligence agencies.²³⁸ In a nutshell, ISIS is an anti-revolutionary force according to the anti-Assad Syrians; therefore, it has no foothold amongst them. Its rapid control of vast territories and the long list of enemies are now disadvantageous to ISIS. It is quite difficult, if not impossible, for them to maintain control over an enormous portion of land in Syria and Iraq with only 35,000 fighters against the Syrian insurgents, Turkey, the International Coalition, the SDF and the Assad regime. The pressure put on the Syrian insurgents by the regime and the International

²³⁸Interview with various Syrian insurgents and civilians.

Coalition would give fresh breath to ISIS; while the increasing US support for the SDF, i.e. the YPG, would increase ISIS' social resistance capacity.

Despite its rigid ideological formation, ISIS' transformation skills are remarkable. ISIS-like messianic groups are known for their survival skills even though their prophecies fail repeatedly. In the event of ISIS losing its territorial grip in Syria and Iraq, it would transform itself organizationally and keep operating in different forms and capacities. When ISIS loses blood in Syria and Iraq, it will likely turn towards other countries and plan terrorist attacks like the ones in Ankara, Brussels and Paris. The foreign fighters who will return to their home countries will constitute a gigantic problem and a great security risk for more than 80 countries. Unless the international community decides to address the political, economic and ideological causes that create ISIS and its likes, ISIS will continue its operations under a different name and banner to regain the peak of the power held in June 2014.

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9. Appendices

A- Appendix 1: The Sequence of Territorial Possessions

Raqqa		
1	Surab Sharqiye	R-O-I-Y
2	Abwa	R-O-I-Y
3	Al-Qantary	R-O-I-Y
4	Faraj	R-O-I-Y
5	Al Asaylem	R-O-I-Y
6	Al Masudiye	R-O-I-Y
7	Mushirfah	R-O-I-Y
8	Luwibdah	R-O-I-Y
9	Sheikh Daham	R-O-I-Y
10	Ash Shaykh Hasan	R-O-I-Y
11	Al Heisha	R-O-I-Y
12	Mutqaltah	R-O-I-Y
13	Al Qadiriyyah	R-O-I-Y
14	Sukayro	R-O-I-Y
15	Tall Zkero	R-O-I-Y
16	Fatisah	R-O-I-Y
17	Aljmijm	R-O-I-Y
18	Alyan	R-O-I-Y
19	Ayn Issa	R-O-I-Y
20	Khirbet Hadla	R-O-I-Y
21	Al Habsawi	R-O-I-Y
22	Al Mustarihah	R-O-I-Y
23	Mughira	R-O-I-Y
24	Abu Shaham	R-O-I-Y
25	Abu Naytulah	R-O-I-Y
26	Abu Serra	R-O-I-Y
27	Sab Jifar	R-O-I-Y
28	Al Zaide	R-O-I-Y
29	Um Hayaya	R-O-I-Y
30	Dikhakiye	R-O-I-Y
31	Bir Jalab	R-O-I-Y
32	Al Mazliqaniyah	R-O-I-Y
33	Al Buedr	R-O-I-Y
34	Hawasi	R-O-I-Y

35	Tiba	R-O-I-Y
36	El Tifada	R-O-I-Y
37	Tiba	R-O-I-Y
38	Tell Ghajar al Kabir	R-O-I-Y
39	Ghizlan	R-O-I-Y
40	Badei Suluk	R-O-I-Y
41	Bir Allah	R-O-I-Y
42	Eysha	R-O-I-Y
43	Al Quwaylat	R-O-I-Y
44	Al Hassani	R-O-I-Y
45	Bir Asi	R-O-I-Y
46	Al Khatum	R-O-I-Y
47	Jamus	R-O-I-Y
48	Hasnah al Sharqiyah	R-O-I-Y
49	Waesta garby	R-O-I-Y
50	Al Raqbah	R-O-I-Y
51	Muhaysiyah	R-O-I-Y
52	Aldahar	R-O-I-Y
53	Shabdagh	R-O-I-Y
54	Zuzulah	R-O-I-Y
55	Qunaitrah	R-O-I-Y
56	Qattar	R-O-I-Y
57	Al Sukkariyah	R-O-I-Y
58	Malha	R-O-I-Y
59	Al Hoz	R-O-I-Y
60	Arbed	R-O-I-Y
61	Beer Almajlah	R-O-I-Y
62	Mufrah	R-O-I-Y
63	Suluk	R-O-I-Y
64	Rafah	R-O-I-Y
65	Abu Qabr	R-O-I-Y
66	Hammam Turkman Janubi	R-O-I-Y
67	Hammam Turkman	R-O-I-Y
68	Damishliyah	R-O-I-Y
69	Shar Karak	R-O-I-Y
70	Shuweynah	R-O-I-Y
71	Wasita	R-O-I-Y
72	Ali Bajhiyah	R-O-I-Y
73	Zanbaq	R-O-I-Y
74	Dughaniyah	R-O-I-Y
75	Khirbat ar Ruzz	R-O-I-Y

76	Shunayah	R-O-I-Y
77	Huwayjat al Abd	R-O-I-Y
78	Laqtah	R-O-I-Y
79	Rustam Mustafa	R-O-I-Y
80	Azzam	R-O-I-Y
81	Jindawi	R-O-I-Y
82	Isawi	R-O-I-Y
83	Abu al Ayash	R-O-I-Y
84	Abu Kabr	R-O-I-Y
85	Shunaynah	R-O-I-Y
86	Tell Breghi	R-O-I-Y
87	Meshur Tahtani	R-O-I-Y
88	Tell Abyad	R-O-I-Y
89	Jabla	R-O-I-Y
90	New Tall Abyad	R-O-I-Y
91	Ain Al Arous	R-O-I-Y
92	Farjah	R-O-I-Y
93	Al Yabisah	R-O-I-Y
94	Tell Fendr	R-O-I-Y
95	Al Sawwan	R-O-I-Y
96	Bir Atwan	R-O-I-Y
97	Abdo	R-O-I-Y
98	Khafiyah	R-O-I-Y
99	Mutamashrij	R-O-I-Y
100	Umm Kabir	R-O-I-Y
101	Rahifiyah	R-O-I-Y
102	Tarbikh	R-O-I-Y
103	Abu Khurayzah	R-O-I-Y
104	Umm Huwaysh	R-O-I-Y
105	Zinar	R-O-I-Y
106	Khirbat Tayyibay	R-O-I-Y
107	Saada	R-O-I-Y
108	Mannakil	R-O-I-Y
109	Dabah	R-O-I-Y
110	Shunaynah	R-O-I-Y
111	Shubah	R-O-I-Y
112	Hajjaziyah	R-O-I-Y
113	Juran	R-O-I-Y
114	Zanubah	R-O-I-Y
115	Khirbat al Baqar	R-O-I-Y
116	Mabujah	R-O-I-Y

117	Abu Hayyah	R-O-I-Y
118	Sukkariyah	R-O-I-Y
119	Yarqu	R-O-I-Y
120	Bir Kino	R-O-I-Y
121	Qiz Ali	R-O-I-Y
122	Khirbat al Fares	R-O-I-Y
123	Khafiyah	R-O-I-Y
124	Qandariyah	R-O-I-Y
125	Baghajaq	R-O-I-Y
126	Kandal	R-O-I-Y
127	Sawsak	R-O-I-Y
128	Gire Sor	R-O-I-Y
129	Abdi	R-O-I-Y
130	Sharikh	R-O-I-Y
131	Manji Kuy	R-O-I-Y
132	Qaranful Fawqani	R-O-I-Y
133	Kashkar	R-O-I-Y
134	Mutayn	R-O-I-Y
135	Kurtuk Shaykhan	R-O-I-Y
136	Bir Arab	R-O-I-Y
137	Bir Habash	R-O-I-Y
138	Darb Hassan	R-O-I-Y
139	Hurriya	R-O-I-Y
140	Qartal	R-O-I-Y
141	Thamin Al Adhar	R-O-I-Y
142	Zurzuri	R-O-I-Y
143	Shawti	R-O-I-Y
144	Dinnayah	R-O-I-Y
145	Bandar Khan	R-O-I-Y
146	Aqbash	R-O-I-Y
147	Eidanye	R-O-I-Y
148	Bekhdik	R-O-I-Y
149	Kultib	R-O-I-Y
150	Maadan	R-O-I
151	Khas Ujayl	R-O-I
152	al Khuwayshah	R-O-I
153	al Qattah	R-O-I
154	Al Karamah	R-O-I
155	Hamrat Balasim	R-O-I
156	Hamrat Nasir	R-O-I
157	Ukayrishah	R-O-I

158	Ratlah	R-O-I
159	Jadin	R-O-I
160	Jubb Al Abyad	R-O-I
161	Bir Hajj Mufazi	R-O-I
162	Bir Akhu Hadlah	R-O-I
163	Al Hawarah	R-O-I
164	Al Ajil Nus Qirbi	R-O-I
165	ar Raqqa	R-O-I
166	Harran	R-O-I
167	Cotton Factory	R-O-I
168	khirbat alKhan	R-O-I
169	Ar Ruhayyat	R-O-I
170	Bir Jarbu	R-O-I
171	Jarwah	R-O-I
172	Hilo Abed	R-O-I
173	Abbara	R-O-I
174	Qaltah	R-O-I
175	Thulth Khunayz	R-O-I
176	Khunayz	R-O-I
177	Khunayz Fawqani	R-O-I
178	Al Khadr	R-O-I
179	Tall Al Siman	R-O-I
180	Qaryah Armaniyah	R-O-I
181	Abu al Hassan	R-O-I
182	Hazimeh	R-O-I
183	Wihdeh	R-O-I
184	Hettin	R-O-I
185	Abu Qubei	R-O-I
186	Hawi Hawa	R-O-I
187	Rabiah	R-O-I
188	al Qahtaniyah	R-O-I
189	Adnaniyah	R-O-I
190	Yarrub	R-O-I
191	Tishrine	R-O-I
192	Baath Dam	R-O-I
193	Salhabiyat al Gharbiyah	R-O-I
194	Mansurah	R-O-I
195	Hunaydah	R-O-I
196	Ibed	R-O-I
197	As Safsafah	R-O-I
198	Suwaydiat al Kabirah	R-O-I

199	Tapqa	R-O-I
200	al Thawrah	R-O-I
201	Rujum al Khaznah	R-O-I
202	Ayad Kabir	R-O-I
203	Mushayrifah	R-O-I
204	Abu Asi	R-O-I
205	Shatnah	R-O-I
206	Tuwayzan	R-O-I
207	Al Ghamamiz	R-O-I
208	Mashrafat al Sab	R-O-I
209	Al Sab	R-O-I
210	Hanna Safar	R-O-I
211	Khatunyah	R-O-I
212	Al Andalus	R-O-I
213	Mazrat	R-O-I
214	Royan	R-O-I
215	Kabsh	R-O-I
216	Job Shaeer	R-O-I
217	Mushayrifat al Miftah	R-O-I
218	Bir Khuwaym	R-O-I
219	Bir Sana	R-O-I
220	Mahmudli	R-O-I
221	Abu as Sakhrah	R-O-I
222	At Tuwayhinah	R-O-I
223	Bir az Zabad	R-O-I
224	Bir Hammud Al Yusuf	R-O-I
225	Taltaraqu	R-O-I
226	Karawan	R-O-I
227	Ramla	R-O-I
228	al Jurniyah	R-O-I
229	Othman	R-O-I
230	Shallal	R-O-I
231	al Haymar	R-O-I
232	Sykol	R-O-I
233	Merdas	R-O-I
234	Shathah	R-O-I
235	Shker Kaower	R-O-I
236	Al Hedy	R-O-I
237	Harmalah	R-O-I
238	Abo Sosah	R-O-I
239	Addrobiah	R-O-I

240	Tapqa Airbase	R-I
241	Division 17	R-I
242	Brigade 93	R-I
243	Marwan	R-O-I-Y
244	Kerdoshan	R-O-I-Y
245	Abu Majid	R-O-I-Y
246	Qadiriyyah	R-O-I-Y
247	Ali Shumary	R-O-I-Y
248	Bir ad Damm	R-O-I-Y
249	Dandushan	R-O-I-Y
250	Sayqul	R-O-I-Y
251	Halindijah	R-O-I-Y
252	Mahfazah	R-O-I-Y
253	Bir ash Shamli	R-O-I-Y
254	Bir Bakar	R-O-I-Y
255	Naqut	R-O-I-Y
256	Shaykh Inan	R-O-I-Y
257	Abu Duan	R-O-I-Y
258	Khashkhash al Kabir	R-O-I-Y
259	Tishrin Dam	R-O-I-Y
260	Khashkhash Saghir	R-O-I-Y
261	Shash	R-O-I-Y
262	Jabal ash Shash	R-O-I-Y
263	Khirbat Zammalah	R-O-I-Y
264	Khirbat Khalid	R-O-I-Y
265	Jabal ad Dubb	R-O-I-Y
266	Jubb al Sheikh Ubaid	R-O-I-Y
267	Tishrin	R-O-I-Y
268	Jabal al Qulayb	R-O-I-Y
269	Sakawiyah	R-O-I-Y
270	Tal Aresh	R-O-I-Y
271	Sekanya	R-O-I-Y
272	Abu Qelqel	R-O-I-Y
273	Halulat	R-O-I-Y
274	Saadiya	R-O-I-Y
275	Safari	R-O-I-Y
276	Tuzinj	R-O-I-Y
277	Qararishek	R-O-I-Y
278	Dayr Falit	R-O-I-Y
279	Haynli	R-O-I-Y
280	Joqur	R-O-I-Y

281	Derbatan	R-O-I-Y
282	Khirbat Hamu	R-O-I-Y
283	Tulik	R-O-I-Y
284	Khan Mamid	R-O-I-Y
285	Qantarah	R-O-I-Y
286	Hamadun	R-O-I-Y
287	Kabbat Rabb	R-O-I-Y
288	Hiyali Kuyuk	R-O-I-Y
289	Khirbat Zarbah	R-O-I-Y
290	Marwah	R-O-I-Y
291	Killiyah	R-O-I-Y
292	Dar al Faraj	R-O-I-Y
293	Wadi Jay Kuy	R-O-I-Y
294	Bir al Ubaydat	R-O-I-Y
295	Tall Bawat	R-O-I-Y
296	al Muwaylih	R-O-I-Y
297	Saharij	R-O-I-Y
298	al Mansiyah	R-O-I-Y
299	Mukmar	R-O-I-Y
300	Bujaq	R-O-I-Y
301	Jubb Mahli	R-O-I-Y
302	Malah	R-O-I-Y
303	Mighribtin	R-O-I-Y
304	Hafyan	R-O-I-Y
305	Shuhada	R-O-I-Y
306	Qasiq Qibli	R-O-I-Y
307	Ras al Ayn al Qibli	R-O-I-Y
308	Bir Jaff	R-O-I-Y
309	Arne	R-O-I-Y
310	Kharab Burghul	R-O-I-Y
311	Qirat	R-O-I-Y
312	Qirat Kurdan	R-O-I-Y
313	Karak Mawla	R-O-I-Y
314	Sarrin	R-O-I-Y
315	Kablak	R-O-I-Y
316	Nur Ali	R-O-I-Y
317	Qalat Hadid	R-O-I-Y
318	Khirbat al Burj	R-O-I-Y
319	Huwayjat At Alawi	R-O-I-Y
320	Sunayn	R-O-I-Y
321	Qarah Qawzaq	R-O-I-Y

322	Kuk Tappah Kubra	R-O-I-Y
323	Chelebi	R-O-I-Y
324	Kurtuk	R-O-I-Y
325	Raqqas Tahtani	R-O-I-Y
326	Raqqas Fawqani	R-O-I-Y
327	Bokhi	R-O-I-Y
328	Sheykh Qamaz	R-O-I-Y
329	Qazani	R-O-I-Y
330	Mile	R-O-I-Y
331	Khanik Tahtani	R-O-I-Y
332	Khanik Fawqani	R-O-I-Y
333	Sarunj	R-O-I-Y
334	Dimbrak Sheykhani	R-O-I-Y
335	Buz Huyuk Fawqani	R-O-I-Y
336	Buz Huyuk Tahtani	R-O-I-Y
337	Karbalak	R-O-I-Y
338	Lahinah	R-O-I-Y
339	Bir Umar	R-O-I-Y
340	Solan	R-O-I-Y
341	Kawran	R-O-I-Y
342	Itubiran Fawqani	R-O-I-Y
343	Hulaqi	R-O-I-Y
344	Kharab Nas	R-O-I-Y
345	Ayn al Batt	R-O-I-Y
346	Tayri	R-O-I-Y
347	Mandik	R-O-I-Y
348	Jayl	R-O-I-Y
349	Khorkhori	R-O-I-Y
350	Sal	R-O-I-Y
351	Zayrik	R-O-I-Y
352	Zinari	R-O-I-Y
353	Ghajar Tahtani	R-O-I-Y
354	Fanik	R-O-I-Y
355	Sharabati	R-O-I-Y
356	Karus	R-O-I-Y
357	Hamamik	R-O-I-Y
358	Tashli Huyuk al Fawqani	R-O-I-Y
359	Feyaz	R-O-I-Y
360	Belek	R-O-I-Y
361	Kablak	R-O-I-Y
362	Sabat Fawqani	R-O-I-Y

363	Septe	R-O-I-Y
364	Khilawmar	R-O-I-Y
365	Jalik	R-O-I-Y
366	Kharab Kurd	R-O-I-Y
367	Dibrak	R-O-I-Y
368	Qarah Mazrah	R-O-I-Y
369	Shaykh Jayban	R-O-I-Y
370	Makhrāj	R-O-I-Y
371	Tell Ghazal	R-O-I-Y
372	Khazinah	R-O-I-Y
373	Brakh Batan	R-O-I-Y
374	Tafshu	R-O-I-Y
375	Aydiq	R-O-I-Y
376	Rubi	R-O-I-Y
377	Grain Silos	R-O-I-Y
378	Dunghiz Kabir	R-O-I-Y
379	Kawurk Habib	R-O-I-Y
380	Zarwik	R-O-I-Y
381	Kurus	R-O-I-Y
382	Quwaytaji	R-O-I-Y
383	Turamam	R-O-I-Y
384	Jadah	R-O-I-Y
385	East Qubbah	R-O-I-Y
386	West Qubbah	R-O-I-Y
387	Qaruf	R-O-I-Y
388	Kawrak	R-O-I-Y
389	Qaruf	R-O-I-Y
390	Satayah	R-O-I-Y
391	Qawmi	R-O-I-Y
392	Zarkawtak	R-O-I-Y
393	Qasimiyah	R-O-I-Y
394	Dadeli	R-O-I-Y
395	Qoshliya Jerin	R-O-I-Y
396	Zikari	R-O-I-Y
397	Kabik	R-O-I-Y
398	Qanaya	R-O-I-Y
399	Bidayah	R-O-I-Y
400	Shamak	R-O-I-Y
401	Bandir	R-O-I-Y
402	Illajaq	R-O-I-Y
403	Shuyukh Tahtani	R-O-I-Y

404	Talik	R-O-I-Y
405	Shuyukh Fawqani	R-O-I-Y
406	Xerab Eto	R-O-I-Y
407	Jubb al Faraj	R-O-I-Y
408	Mishku	R-O-I-Y
409	Jibnah	R-O-I-Y
410	Bayadiyah	R-O-I-Y
411	Ziyarete	R-O-I-Y
412	Zawr Mughar	R-O-I-Y
413	Qiran	R-O-I-Y
414	Ashma	R-O-I-Y
415	Jariqli Fawqani	R-O-I-Y
416	Rasm Falah	R-O-I
417	Maskanah	R-O-I
418	Sakariyah	R-O-I
419	Khirbat Hajj Abidan	R-O-I
420	Ras Al Ayn Al Ahmar	R-O-I
421	Wadihah al Judaydah	R-O-I
422	Nafriyah	R-O-I
423	Jiras Airbase	R-O-I
424	Al Mahdum	R-O-I
425	Rasm Alkhamis Ash Sharqi	R-O-I
426	Rasm Al Khamis Al Gharbi	R-O-I
427	Abu Maqbarah Saghir	R-O-I
428	Jafirah	R-O-I
429	Kharayih Diham	R-O-I
430	Wadi Muwaylih	R-O-I
431	Jafirah Mansur	R-O-I
432	Umm Adasah	R-O-I
433	Al Qusayr	R-O-I
434	Shuraymah	R-O-I
435	Jinni al Salamah	R-O-I
436	Tall Aqulah	R-O-I
437	Deir Hafir	R-O-I
438	Khafsah Kabir	R-O-I
439	Ash Shajarah	R-O-I
440	Tall Homan	R-O-I
441	Tall Aswad	R-O-I
442	Arbah Kabirah	R-O-I
443	Ras AlAyn Humur	R-O-I
444	Kharufiyah al Kabirah	R-O-I

445	Umm al Saraj Mountam	R-O-I
446	Jubb Hasan Agha	R-O-I
447	Jubb al Tawil	R-O-I
448	Umm Amyal	R-O-I
449	Aosgele	R-O-I
450	Hunaynah al Kabirah	R-O-I
451	Rasm Harmil	R-O-I
452	Rasm Al Kabir	R-O-I
453	Rasm Al Kama	R-O-I
454	Khirbat Bijan	R-O-I
455	Mazburah	R-O-I
456	Jabal Sulaym	R-O-I
457	Qasr al Burayj	R-O-I
458	Abu Jabbar	R-O-I
459	Sukkariyah Kabirah	R-O-I
460	Ayn al Jahsh	R-O-I
461	Aran	R-O-I
462	Jubb al Kalb	R-O-I
463	Jubb Ghabshah	R-O-I
464	Rasm Al Abd	R-O-I
465	Tall Barlemiyah	R-O-I
466	Rasm Al Alam	R-O-I
467	Taana Air Defense base	R-O-I
468	Suran	R-O-I
469	al Madruna	R-O-I
470	Dayr Qaq	R-O-I
471	Tedef	R-O-I
472	al Bab	R-O-I
473	Bzaa	R-O-I
474	Qabasin	R-O-I
475	Arima	R-O-I
476	Saidia	R-O-I
477	Manbij	R-O-I
478	Khirbat Al Bighal	R-O-I
479	Al Hajar	R-O-I
480	Al Madaseh	R-O-I
481	Najam Castle	R-O-I
482	Jubb Al Abyad	R-O-I
483	Bir Khalah	R-O-I
484	Kirsan	R-O-I
485	Al Masharfa	R-O-I

486	Mishrefeh Saghirah	R-O-I
487	Qabar Imu	R-O-I
488	Hayya Saghirah	R-O-I
489	Munbug	R-O-I
490	Al Tuwal	R-O-I
491	Al Dushan	R-O-I
492	Al Zour	R-O-I
493	Ayn Al Nakhil	R-O-I
494	Hudhud	R-O-I
495	Tall ar Kafee	R-O-I
496	Takhur Salama	R-O-I
497	Tukhar Taymu	R-O-I
498	Hafar	R-O-I
499	Tell Jaqmaqli	R-O-I
500	Qirq Maghar	R-O-I
501	Bal Maghar	R-O-I
502	Zawr al Magharah	R-O-I
503	Dulaym	R-O-I
504	Jubb al Kusa	R-O-I
505	Khirbat al Suraysat	R-O-I
506	Akpinar	R-O-I
507	Amarinah	R-O-I
508	Awn Al Dadat	R-O-I
509	Halwanji	R-O-I
510	Munhsinli	R-O-I
511	Al Shamel	R-O-I
512	Dhastan	R-O-I
513	Jarabulus	R-O-I
514	Tell Marma al Hajar	R-O-I
515	Al Hilwaniyah	R-O-I
516	Haymar	R-O-I
517	Mazalah	R-O-I
518	Yusuf Bayk	R-O-I
519	Qunduriyah	R-O-I
520	Al Hadirah	R-O-I
521	Hafirah	R-O-I
522	Al Bir Fawqani	R-O-I
523	Turaykham	R-O-I
524	Bal Wiran	R-O-I
525	Shuaynah	R-O-I
526	Tall al Aghar	R-O-I

527	Al Ghndurah	R-O-I
528	Bali	R-O-I
529	Mount Sayyadah	R-O-I
530	Alkaukla	R-O-I
531	Bash Jurn	R-O-I
532	Qubbat Shih	R-O-I
533	Susanbat	R-O-I
534	Tall Jurji	R-O-I
535	Sandi	R-O-I
536	Shawah	R-O-I
537	Naghah Mountain	R-O-I
538	Qadilar	R-O-I
539	Mamali	R-O-I
540	Bab Laymun	R-O-I
541	Qalqum Mountain	R-O-I
542	Ayyase	R-O-I
543	Molla Yakup	R-O-I
544	Al Rai Border point	R-O-I
545	Al Rai	R-O-I
546	Tall Battal	R-O-I
547	Tathumus	R-O-I
548	Tall Shair	R-O-I
549	Sandarah	R-O-I
550	Kedrish	R-O-I
551	Ziyadiye	R-O-I
552	Bahurtah	R-O-I
553	Dudiyah	R-O-I
554	Al Judaydah	R-O-I
555	Qizil Mezra	R-O-I
556	Al Tawghali	R-O-I
557	Jarez	R-O-I
558	Mazra Talibiyah	R-O-I
559	Sawran	R-O-I
560	Ehtimilat	R-O-I
561	Duwaybiq	R-O-I
562	Murayghil	R-O-I
563	Turkman Barih	R-O-I
564	Azizia	R-O-I
565	Al Ghaylaniyah	R-O-I
566	Arshaf	R-O-I
567	Dabiq	R-O-I

568	Til Alyan	R-O-I
569	Kiebe	R-O-I
570	Tall Battal Sharqi	R-O-I
571	Naman	R-O-I
572	Shaalah	R-O-I
573	Nayrabiyyah	R-O-I
574	Hazwan	R-O-I
575	Susiyān	R-O-I
576	Tall Unayb	R-O-I
577	Judah	R-O-I
578	Tanah	R-O-I
579	Tal Jijan	R-O-I
580	Ablah	R-O-I
581	Shidud	R-O-I
582	Qebtan	R-O-I
583	Talatayna	R-O-I
584	Barouza	R-O-I
585	Akhtarīn	R-O-I
586	Al Salihīyah	R-O-I
587	Hawar ala Nahr	R-O-I
588	Sunbul	R-O-I
589	Ghaytun	R-O-I
590	Al Ghuz	R-O-I
591	Kassar	R-O-I
592	Tuways	R-O-I
593	Al Uyun	R-O-I
594	Tall Malid	R-O-I
595	Herbel	R-O-I
596	Al Tuwāihaniyah	R-O-I
597	Wasīfiyah	R-O-I
598	Sad Shahba	R-O-I
599	Tall Madhiq	R-O-I
600	Al Hasia	R-O-I
601	Maarrat Umm Hawsh	R-O-I
602	Hosniyah	R-O-I
603	Umm Al Quraa	R-O-I
604	Wahshiyah	R-O-I
605	Qaramil	R-O-I
606	Halisah	R-O-I
607	Tall Susyan	R-O-I
608	Kafr Qaris	R-O-I

609	Tell Qarah	R-O-I
610	Aleppo Infantry Academy	R-O-I
611	Jubah	R-O-I
612	Shamer	R-O-I
613	Fafin	R-O-I
614	Production Facility	R-O-I
615	Wadiah	R-O-I
616	Jubb al Safa	R-O-I
617	Aleppo Thermal Power Plant	R-O-I
618	Al Muflisah	R-O-I
619	Umm Al Amad	R-O-I
620	Tal Alam	R-O-I
621	Al Halabiyah	R-O-I
622	Qasar Al Wurood	R-O-I
623	Salhiyah	R-O-I
624	Ayn Sabil	R-O-I
625	Tall Riman	R-O-I
626	Tall Ahmar	R-O-I
627	Tall Ayyub	R-O-I
628	Umm Zulaylah	R-O-I
629	Hamaymah as Saghir	R-O-I
630	Umm Al Mara	R-O-I
631	Humaymah Al Kabirah	R-O-I
632	Rasm Al 'Abd	R-O-I
633	Tall Maksur	R-O-I-R
634	Tannouza	R-O-I-R
635	Al Afish	R-O-I-R
636	Tall al Hattabat	R-O-I-R
637	Qatar	R-O-I-R
638	Najjarah	R-O-I-R
639	Ayishah	R-O-I-R
640	Tell Sharabi	R-O-I-R
641	Sharabi'	R-O-I-R
642	Arbid al Jadaydah	R-O-I-R
643	Jarouf	R-O-I-R
644	Judaydah Arbin	R-O-I-R
645	Arbid	R-O-I-R
646	ICARDA farms	R-O-I-R
647	Nasr Allah	R-O-I-R
648	Rasm Abbud	R-O-I-R
649	Ayn al Baydah	R-O-I-R

650	Ajjouziyah	R-O-I-R
651	Multafitah	R-O-I-R
652	Rasm as Sirhan	R-O-I-R
653	Surayb	R-O-I-R
654	Shuwaylikh	R-O-I-R
655	Aqulah	R-O-I-R
656	Sheikh Ahmad Train Station	R-O-I-R
657	Kuweires Sharqi	R-O-I-R
658	Umm Arkilah	R-O-I-R
659	Tall Sabin	R-O-I-R
660	Judaydah	R-O-I-R
661	Burayjah	R-O-I-R
662	Huwayjiyah	R-O-I-R
663	Tel Naam	R-O-I-R
664	Dakwanah	R-O-I-R
665	Al Nasiriyah	R-O-I-R
666	Salhiyah	R-O-I
667	Jarwan	R-O-I
668	Matab	R-O-I
669	Al Jezrah	R-O-I
670	Al Kubar	R-O-I
671	Madan Atiq	R-O-I
672	Shayma	R-O-I
673	Tabni	R-O-I
674	Harmushiyah	R-O-I
675	Al Buwaytiyah	R-O-I
676	Al Kasrah	R-O-I
677	Al Tarif	R-O-I
678	Al Musareb	R-O-I
679	Bustan Ali Ubaid	R-O-I
680	Rusafah	R-O-I
681	Al Hamad	R-O-I
682	Al Shaumaytiyah	R-O-I
683	Zughayr	R-O-I
684	Zuwair	R-O-I
685	Al Khuraytah	R-O-I
686	Al Huwayjah	R-O-I
687	Abu Ghanimah	R-O-I
688	Muhaymidah	R-O-I
689	Safirah Tahtani	R-O-I
690	Ayyash	R-O-I

691	Safirah fawqani	R-O-I
692	Al Baghiliyah	R-O-I
693	Kharta oil facility	R-O-I
694	Al shulah	R-O-I
695	Kabajeb	R-O-I
696	Sadah	R-O-I
697	Muwaylih	R-O-I
698	Gharbiya	R-O-I
699	Al Huseen	R-O-I
700	Al Hariyah	R-O-I
701	Al Suwar	R-O-I
702	Al Namliyah	R-O-I
703	Al Hereji	R-O-I
704	Al Hejjnah	R-O-I
705	Al Maashiq Dman	R-O-I
706	Abreeha	R-O-I
707	Al Zir	R-O-I
708	Al Busayrah	R-O-I
709	Al Zur	R-O-I
710	Abu layl	R-O-I
711	Dahleh	R-O-I
712	Jadid Bu Khayr	R-O-I
713	Jadid Uqaydat	R-O-I
714	Al Muhasan	R-O-I
715	Al Bu Muayt	R-O-I
716	Al Jubailah	R-O-I
717	Al Mariyah Farms	R-O-I
718	Al Mariyah	R-O-I
719	Khasham	R-O-I
720	Marat	R-O-I
721	Jafrah	R-O-I
722	Hatlah	R-O-I
723	Sabhan	R-O-I
724	Abu Waleed Farm	R-O-I
725	Jabal Turdah	R-O-I
726	Al Thayyem processinf plant	R-O-I
727	Ash Shola oil Filed	R-O-I
728	Al Omar Field	R-O-I
729	Tanak processing plant	R-O-I
730	Al Shahil	R-O-I
731	Buqrus	R-O-I

732	Al Bulel	R-O-I
733	Mayadin	R-O-I
734	Al Quriyah	R-O-I
735	Tayyaneh	R-O-I
736	Al Kassar	R-O-I
737	T2 Pumbing Station	R-O-I
738	Al Asharah	R-O-I
739	Suwaydan Jazirah	R-O-I
740	Al Jurdi al Gharbi	R-O-I
741	Dablan	R-O-I
742	Abu Hardub	R-O-I
743	Subaykhan	R-O-I
744	Al Jurdi ash Sharqi	R-O-I
745	Kashkiyah	R-O-I
746	Abu Hammam	R-O-I
747	Granj	R-O-I
748	Al Word oil Field	R-O-I
749	Al Salihiyah (Hajin)	R-O-I
750	Hajin	R-O-I
751	Al Jalaa	R-O-I
752	Al Hasrat	R-O-I
753	Abu Hassan	R-O-I
754	Sayyal	R-O-I
755	Hamdan air base	R-O-I
756	As Sukkariyah	R-O-I
757	Al Bukamal	R-O-I
758	Deir ez Zor (opposition controlled)	R-O-I
759	Al Jina	R-O-I
760	Ar Ruay	R-O-I
761	Markada	R-O-I
762	al Shamsani	R-O-I
763	Dashishah	R-O-I
764	al Fadghami	R-O-I
765	Aazawi	R-O-I
766	Kalka	R-O-I
767	Howeija	R-O-I
768	Showeykhan	R-O-I
769	Tall al Jabir	R-O-I
770	El Dishishiyah	R-O-I
771	El Sayba	R-O-I
772	Tal Safouq	R-O-I

773	Abu Ezran	R-O-I
774	Abou Sakha Shimali	R-O-I
775	Mamerh	R-O-I
776	Jabisah Oil Filed	R-O-I
777	Majlub	R-O-I
778	Aadleh	R-O-I
779	Al Shaddadi	R-O-I
780	al Tawsaiya	R-O-I
781	Umm Ahzar	R-O-I
782	Siha	R-O-I
783	Rashidiyah	R-O-I
784	Sabaa	R-O-I
785	Karaja	R-O-I
786	Hanna	R-O-I
787	Bajah Sharqiyah	R-O-I
788	Taramiyah el Sharqiyah	R-O-I
789	Ramlan Sharqi	R-O-I
790	Khirbat as Sanam	R-O-I
791	Khirbat As Samm	R-O-I
792	Khirbat at Tamr	R-O-I
793	Salimiyah	R-O-I
794	Kahfat Saghir	R-O-I
795	Khirbat Ash Shawk	R-O-I
796	Al Hulw	R-O-I
797	Khirbat El Sawdae	R-O-I
798	Al Fakka	R-O-I
799	Salihiyah	R-O-I
800	Oum Hafour	R-O-I
801	Rumaylan	R-O-I
802	Rajr	R-O-I
803	Hadaj	R-O-I
804	Umm Mashiyah	R-O-I
805	Finlah	R-O-I
806	Khirbat El Souwaydiyah	R-O-I
807	Kharab	R-O-I
808	Umm Ruqaybah Sharqiyah	R-O-I
809	Tell Araban	R-O-I
810	Hardanah	R-O-I
811	Burj Sharqiyah	R-O-I
812	Al Arishah	R-O-I
813	Hamadaniyah	R-O-I

814	Sabburiyah	R-O-I
815	Ajajah Gharbiyah	R-O-I
816	Ghuzaylan ash Sharqi	R-O-I
817	Manajid Fawqani	R-O-I
818	Tulul Khunayzir	R-O-I
819	Khunayzir	R-O-I
820	Tall Jarma	R-O-I
821	Jabal al Bayda	R-O-I
822	Tall Nisr	R-O-I
823	Rujm Sufayrat	R-O-I
824	Hveziya	R-O-I-Y
825	Al Ghunah	R-O-I-Y
826	Oum Hajar	R-O-I-Y
827	Turaykimiyah	R-O-I-Y
828	Makhfar Umm Jaris	R-O-I-Y
829	Sini El Arus	R-O-I-Y
830	Kusaybah	R-O-I-Y
831	Chambah	R-O-I-Y
832	Shombehiya mountian	R-O-I-Y
833	Tall ad Dabban	R-O-I-Y
834	Tishreen Fuel Station	R-O-I-Y
835	Janabeh	R-O-I-Y
836	Khuytlh Khan	R-O-I-Y
837	Sawi	R-O-I-Y
838	Ayn Qattarah	R-O-I-Y
839	Tell Djellalah	R-O-I-Y
840	Al Hawl Oil Field	R-O-I-Y
841	Al Hawl	R-O-I-Y
842	Shulalah	R-O-I-Y
843	Ghassan	R-O-I-Y
844	Rabia	R-O-I-Y
845	Taghlib	R-O-I-Y
846	Wael	R-O-I-Y
847	Temim	R-O-I-Y
848	Selim	R-O-I-Y
849	Khaza	R-O-I-Y
850	Hamdan	R-O-I-Y
851	Umm Hujayrat Khawatinah	R-O-I-Y
852	Nazilah	R-O-I-Y
853	Shawilah	R-O-I-Y
854	Tall Naur	R-O-I-Y

855	Arjah	R-O-I-Y
856	Rumaylah Hasaka	R-O-I-Y
857	Sfane	R-O-I-Y
858	Qadisiye	R-O-I-Y
859	Jazaah	R-O-I-Y
860	Bekara	R-O-I-Y
861	Zubaydah	R-O-I-Y
862	Mestriha	R-O-I-Y
863	al Sharah	R-O-I-Y
864	Abu Jari	R-O-I-Y
865	Tehama Eastern	R-O-I-Y
866	Tehama Western	R-O-I-Y
867	Tell Abu Khadhat	R-O-I-Y
868	Dhahran	R-O-I-Y
869	East Qurtubah	R-O-I-Y
870	West Qurtubah	R-O-I-Y
871	Tell Masker al Tor	R-O-I-Y
872	Yathrib	R-O-I-Y
873	Hums	R-O-I-Y
874	Hudaybiyah	R-O-I-Y
875	Khola	R-O-I-Y
876	Zahra	R-O-I-Y
877	Ukaz	R-O-I-Y
878	Zaki ak Kabir	R-O-I-Y
879	Al Taif	R-O-I-Y
880	Thabet Shammar	R-O-I-Y
881	el Festad	R-O-I-Y
882	Um al Qura	R-O-I-Y
883	Tall Damdan	R-O-I-Y
884	Tall Safrah	R-O-I-Y
885	Balqees Kabirah	R-O-I-Y
886	Al Haswa	R-O-I-Y
887	Abu Kashat	R-O-I-Y
888	Judaymah	R-O-I-Y
889	Tall Muhammad Ali	R-O-I-Y
890	Tell Eisa	R-O-I-Y
891	Tall Zanatri	R-O-I-Y
892	Ghazalah	R-O-I-Y
893	Abu Jumayn	R-O-I-Y
894	Tell al Shayr	R-O-I-Y
895	Bir Jafar	R-O-I-Y

896	Mushrifah	R-O-I-Y
897	Wansa	R-O-I-Y
898	Tell Marshudi	R-O-I-Y
899	Masudiyah	R-O-I-Y
900	Umm Hurjah	R-O-I-Y
901	Kaznah	R-O-I-Y
902	Qobur Fadil	R-O-I-Y
903	Mahmoudiyah	R-O-I-Y
904	Tell al Saman	R-O-I-Y
905	Mushifat Al Wardi	R-O-I-Y
906	Busariyah	R-O-I-Y
907	Hassoun	R-O-I-Y
908	Rajm Tufayhi	R-O-I-Y
909	Matalit	R-O-I-Y
910	Kharita	R-O-I-Y
911	Emurus	R-O-I-Y
912	Kharab an Nawaf	R-O-I-Y
913	Tell Umm Aruz	R-O-I-Y
914	Al Sakman	R-O-I-Y
915	Tell Khidir	R-O-I-Y
916	Tell Hamis	R-O-I-Y
917	Husayniyah	R-O-I-Y
918	Hulwah	R-O-I-Y
919	Barziyat	R-O-I-Y
920	Rashidiyah	R-O-I-Y
921	Fakhhariyah	R-O-I-Y
922	Tell Banadurah	R-O-I-Y
923	Al Hamaniyat	R-O-I-Y
924	Kadimiyyat	R-O-I-Y
925	Khirbat khurayjat	R-O-I-Y
926	Hadima	R-O-I-Y
927	Khuwaytilah Jawwala	R-O-I-Y
928	Mushayrifah Kbirah	R-O-I-Y
929	Rasm al Duru	R-O-I-Y
930	Tell Bardah	R-O-I-Y
931	Tell Lahem	R-O-I-Y
932	Tell Mastti	R-O-I-Y
933	Alabakth	R-O-I-Y
934	Bir Hulu	R-O-I-Y
935	Khirbat Atshsn	R-O-I-Y
936	Khirbat Shekh	R-O-I-Y

937	Tell Abu Najur	R-O-I-Y
938	Qajqam Kebir	R-O-I-Y
939	Sumayahan Sharqi	R-O-I-Y
940	Hulwat Smeihan	R-O-I-Y
941	Tell Keshla Shmali	R-O-I-Y
942	Tell Keshla Janoobi	R-O-I-Y
943	Khirbat Suwayfat	R-O-I-Y
944	Qishlah	R-O-I-Y
945	umm Kufayf	R-O-I-Y
946	Smeihan Gharbi	R-O-I-Y
947	Tel Azana	R-O-I-Y
948	Masudiye	R-O-I-Y
949	Tell Brak	R-O-I-Y
950	South Kasakah Dam	R-O-I-Y
951	Al Karamah	R-O-I-Y
952	Sabah al Khayr Silos	R-O-I-Y
953	Taban	R-O-I-Y
954	Al Khamail	R-O-I-Y
955	Tall adh Dhahab	R-O-I-Y
956	al Melabiya	R-O-I-Y
957	Tall Khalil	R-O-I-Y
958	Tall Baroud	R-O-I-Y
959	Al Hufayir	R-O-I-Y
960	Rujm al Faydat	R-O-I-Y
961	Al Masatur	R-O-I-Y
962	Maa al Faydat	R-O-I-Y
963	Uwaynat al Bazzun	R-O-I-Y
964	Khiriya ayn Alkharan	R-O-I-Y
965	Makhroum	R-O-I-Y
966	Maqtal az Zalim	R-O-I-Y
967	Abyad	R-O-I-Y
968	Rujm Hanash	R-O-I-Y
969	Umm Madfah	R-O-I-Y
970	Nasrat	R-O-I-Y
971	Abd Al Aziz	R-O-I-Y
972	Jabal al Ghaban	R-O-I-Y
973	Jabal Maghlujah	R-O-I-Y
974	Maghlujah	R-O-I-Y
975	Sukkara Castle	R-O-I-Y
976	Qarat al Milah	R-O-I-Y
977	Tell Sib	R-O-I-Y

978	Al Wasittah	R-O-I-Y
979	Al Baydda	R-O-I-Y
980	Khazanah	R-O-I-Y
981	Al Gharah	R-O-I-Y
982	Khirbat al Zara	R-O-I-Y
983	Tell al Mughr	R-O-I-Y
984	Al Khazumiyah	R-O-I-Y
985	Umm al Tulayl	R-O-I-Y
986	Al Jafr	R-O-I-Y
987	Tell Mabtuh Gharbi	R-O-I-Y
988	Jabal as Sufyyan	R-O-I-Y
989	Al Badia	R-O-I-Y
990	Al Mushirfah	R-O-I-Y
991	Safiyah	R-O-I-Y
992	Dawali	R-O-I-Y
993	El Gana	R-O-I-Y
994	Biweda	R-O-I-Y
995	Mebruka	R-O-I-Y
996	Al Khafsah	R-O-I-Y
997	Tall al Lubn	R-O-I-Y
998	Al Bashbaliyah	R-O-I-Y
999	Al Nawfaliyah	R-O-I-Y
1000	Muqeren	R-O-I-Y
1001	Al Farhaniyah	R-O-I-Y
1002	Bur Qadim	R-O-I-Y
1003	Al Salihyah	R-O-I-Y
1004	Ahoesh	R-O-I-Y
1005	Aliya	R-O-I-Y
1006	Al Hassan	R-O-I-Y
1007	Gashgha	R-O-I-Y
1008	Haylah	R-O-I-Y
1009	Kabsh	R-O-I-Y
1010	Al Malihah	R-O-I-Y
1011	Modan	R-O-I-Y
1012	Bahimah	R-O-I-Y
1013	Tall Al Malha	R-O-I-Y
1014	Tall Thimad adl Kabir	R-O-I-Y
1015	Thamad	R-O-I-Y
1016	Arnan Janubi	R-O-I-Y
1017	Abu Jarada	R-O-I-Y
1018	Muqtalla	R-O-I-Y

1019	Teletiyeh	R-O-I-Y
1020	Al Aziziyah	R-O-I-Y
1021	Tell Dibah	R-O-I-Y
1022	Baluja	R-O-I-Y
1023	Khirbat Benat	R-O-I-Y
1024	Tell Hanash	R-O-I-Y
1025	Mabroukah Electrical Substation	R-O-I-Y
1026	Gire Ebubakir	R-O-I-Y
1027	Tell Tawkal	R-O-I-Y
1028	Bokha	R-O-I-Y
1029	Tall Bugha Saghir	R-O-I-Y
1030	Dishu	R-O-I-Y
1031	Tall Balal	R-O-I-Y
1032	Khirbat Khezal	R-O-I-Y
1033	Tell Khenzir	R-O-I-Y
1034	Al Rawiyah	R-O-I-Y
1035	Dehma	R-O-I-Y
1036	Tall Salih	R-O-I-Y
1037	Mabroukah	R-O-I-Y
1038	Tell al Jannab	R-O-I-Y
1039	Abu Shaykhat	R-O-I-Y
1040	Abu Julud	R-O-I-Y
1041	Ajla	R-O-I-Y
1042	Tell Kharab Sayyar	R-O-I-Y
1043	Tall al Qulayah	R-O-I-Y
1044	Dughim Ajaj	R-O-I-Y
1045	Bir Shemo	R-O-I-Y
1046	Shira	R-O-I-Y
1047	Samu	R-O-I-Y
1048	Adwaniyah	R-O-I-Y
1049	Rajan	R-O-I-Y
1050	Khalidiye	R-O-I-Y
1051	Mutamshrij	R-O-I-Y
1052	Khirbat El Naqa	R-O-I-Y
1053	Tell Chuera	R-O-I-Y
1054	Um Jaran	R-O-I-Y
1055	Tall Musa	R-O-I-Y
1056	Rujm Anwah	R-O-I-Y
1057	Nustel	R-O-I-Y
1058	Tell Shiekh Lamis	R-O-I-R
1059	Khrab al Suwayfat	R-O-I-R

1060	Hamidi	R-O-I-R
1061	Umm Tawarikh	R-O-I-R
1062	As Sabah	R-O-I-R
1063	Bawiah	R-O-I-R
1064	Khirbat Taqit	R-O-I-R
1065	Amar Saghir	R-O-I-R
1066	Mushayrifat Kabirah	R-O-I-R
1067	Haddadiyah	R-O-I-R
1068	Ruhayyah as Sawda	R-O-I-R
1069	Farfarah	R-O-I-R
1070	Barziyat	R-O-I-R
1071	Ruhayyah	R-O-I-R
1072	Khirbat as Samra	R-O-I-R
1073	Abu Qasayib	R-O-I-R
1074	Tall Sharmukh	R-O-I-R
1075	Khirbat Asaad	R-O-I-R
1076	Hammar Tawil	R-O-I-R
1077	Tell Sutayh	R-O-I-R
1078	Tall al Tibn	R-O-I-R
1079	Tuwayyil	R-O-I-R
1080	Tall Kubaybah	R-O-I-R
1081	Jiha Kabirah	R-O-I-R
1082	Tal Marouf	R-O-I-R
1083	Jiha Saghirah	R-O-I-R
1084	Khirbat Askar	R-O-I-R
1085	Suwaydiyah al Kabirah	R-O-I-R
1086	Khirbat Khaznah	R-O-I-R
1087	Umm Jafar	R-O-I-R
1088	Ibn Qalaw	R-O-I-R
1089	Khirbat Jammu	R-O-I-R
1090	Hubarah Saghirah	R-O-I-R
1091	Al Kadir	R-O-I
1092	al Kawm	R-O-I
1093	al taybah	R-O-I
1094	Dahr Al Matla	R-O-I
1095	As Sukhnah	R-I
1096	Sukhnah Oil Field	R-I
1097	Qubbat Arak	R-I
1098	Al Hail Gas Field	R-I
1099	At Tuwaymat	R-I
1100	Dahr Jfeifa	R-I

1101	T3 Station	R-1
1102	Arak Station	R-1
1103	Arak	R-1
1104	Jabal al Ghurab	R-1
1105	At Tanf	R-1
1106	Tanf Crossing Point	R-1
1107	Al Halbah	R-1
1108	Al Ulayyaniyah	R-1
1109	Jabal Al Adah	R-1
1110	Rujm Sabah	R-1
1111	Suwaywinat al Amirah	R-1
1112	Al Talila reserve	R-1
1113	Hajar Oil Field	R-1
1114	Mustadira Gas Field	R-1
1115	Abar al Umi	R-1
1116	Ameriya	R-1
1117	Tadmur	R-1
1118	Marhatten	R-1
1119	Al Bayarat	R-1
1120	Tadmur Havalimani	R-1
1121	As Sawwana al Sharqiya	R-1
1122	Khunayfis	R-1
1123	Khunayfis mine	R-1
1124	Al Bardah	R-1
1125	Al Busayri	R-1
1126	Al Mihassah	R-1
1127	Jabal Muhassah	R-1
1128	Qaraytayn	R-1
1129	Tal Al Kharoubah	R-1
1130	Qadr Al Heir	R-1
1131	AL Khan	R-1
1132	Rujm Al Tays	R-1
1133	Tadmuriyah	R-1
1134	Jabab Hamad	R-1
1135	Dab at al milli	R-1
1136	Rasm Humaydah	R-1
1137	Rujm Al Tawil	R-1
1138	Abu at Tababir	R-1
1139	Umm Suhreej	R-1
1140	Abu Hawadid	R-1
1141	Rahhoum	R-1

1142	Unq al Hawa	R-1
1143	al Shanadakhia	R-1
1144	Umm Tin al Muallaq	R-1
1145	Al Mukharram	R-1
1146	Safwani	R-1
1147	Ghuzayliyah	R-1
1148	Al Haba	R-1
1149	Rasm as Suwayd	R-1
1150	Rasm ar Riq	R-1
1151	Al Ja'fiah	R-1
1152	Rasm at Tahta	R-1
1153	Al Mazbal	R-1
1154	Masadah	R-1
1155	Umm ar Rish	R-1
1156	Shayha	R-1
1157	Mughayzil	R-1
1158	Jubb al Bashir	R-1
1159	Al Jabiriyah	R-1
1160	An Nashmi	R-1
1161	Al Wudayhi	R-1
1162	Umm Tauwaynah ash Shamaliyah	R-1
1163	Ar Rabah	R-1
1164	Al Jurf as Shamali	R-1
1165	Tall Shihab	R-1
1166	Umm Qubaybah	R-1
1167	Al Lujj	R-1
1168	Bustan Sabih	R-1
1169	Al Makhbutah	R-1
1170	Luwaybidah	R-1
1171	Jubb ar Rayyan	R-1
1172	Muaaddamiyah	R-1
1173	Jawwasuyah ash Shamaliyah	R-1
1174	Abu Hawarid	R-1
1175	Tibarat al Hamra	R-1
1176	Al Mushayrifah	R-1
1177	Al Kha'fiah	R-1
1178	Rasm ash Shaykh	R-1
1179	Al Waytira	R-1
1180	Ad Dahriyah	R-1
1181	Rasm al Ali	R-1
1182	Jubb az Zatar	R-1

1183	Jabal Hayyan	R-I-R
1184	Al Qadri	R-I-R
1185	Al Dawah	R-I-R
1186	Al Bayarat	R-I-R
1187	Al Qaddahat	R-I-R
1188	Mazrat Abu Al Fawares	R-I-R
1189	Al Muqassam	R-I-R
1190	Turayfawi	R-I-R
1191	Tarfah Sharqiyah	R-I-R
1192	Tafrah Gharbiyah	R-I-R
1193	Al Qalbiyah	R-I-R
1194	Ar Raml	R-I-R
1195	Al Baydhah	R-I-R
1196	Bir Umm al Tababir	R-I-R
1197	Al Jazal	R-I-R
1198	Jazal Oil Field	R-I-R
1199	Mazrur Oil Field	R-I-R
1200	Oil Well	R-I-R
1201	Ebla Gas Plant	R-I-R
1202	Shaer Gas Field	R-I-R
1203	Qarat Al Aridah	R-I-R
1204	Jihar	R-I-R
1205	Zumlat al Maharr	R-I-R
1206	Al mAhr Oil Field	R-I-R
1207	Hayan Gas Company	R-I-R
1208	Jihar Oil Field	R-I-R
1209	Rasm al Tinah	R-I
1210	Al Wastani	R-I
1211	Ruwayda	R-I
1212	Abu Hakfa	R-I
1213	Amun	R-I
1214	Jinn Al Albawi	R-I
1215	Fakhr	R-I
1216	Grouh	R-I
1217	As Salaliyah	R-I
1218	Jubb al Aswad	R-I
1219	Jubb ar Rumman	R-I
1220	Al Huraysha	R-I
1221	Khalid Hilal	R-I
1222	Uqayribat	R-I
1223	Mukhyman al Shamali	R-I

1224	Rasm al Abd	R-I
1225	Rasm al Abaykah	R-I
1226	Al khurayjiyah	R-I
1227	Arshunah	R-I
1228	Tall Adimah	R-I
1229	Al Hardanah	R-I
1230	Khirbat Qasm	R-I
1231	Akash	R-I
1232	soha	R-I
1233	Hamadat al Amr	R-I
1234	Abu Dali	R-I
1235	Abu Ramal	R-I
1236	Abu Hanaya	R-I
1237	Masudiye	R-I
1238	Massada	R-I
1239	salba	R-I
1240	Jubb al Mazazi	R-I
1241	Tall Sad Rishe	R-O-I
1242	Dakwa	R-O-I
1243	Bir Qasab	R-O-I
1244	Hajar Aswad	R-O-I
1245	Yarmuk Camp	R-O-I
1246	Jaroud Rankous	R-O-I
1247	Thaniyat al Yabaridah	R-O-I
1248	Jabal Ghurab	R-O-I
1249	Tall Qabr al Akhawayn	R-O-I
1250	Jaroud Jarajur	R-O-I
1251	Wadi Barada	R-O-I
1252	Al Abakhi	R-I
1253	Tall Salman	R-I
1254	Ushayhib	R-I
1255	Aliya Swayda	R-I
1256	Shinwan	R-I
1257	Banat Baer	R-I
1258	Al Qasr	R-I
1259	Tall Sad	R-I
1260	Khabra	R-I
1261	Al Ashehib Shamali	R-I
1262	Hawsh Hamad	R-O-I
1263	Al Madura	R-O-I
1264	Bakkar Al Gharbi	R-O-I

1265	Sayda Al Golan	R-O-I
1266	Ain Dhakar	R-O-I
1267	Nafiah	R-O-I
1268	Al Shajarah	R-O-I
1269	Abdin	R-O-I
1270	Beit Arrah	R-O-I
1271	Kuwayah	R-O-I
1272	Jamla	R-O-I
1273	Asaara	R-O-I
1274	Maariyah	R-O-I



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Mershon Center for International Security Studies, Columbus, OH Research Associate	2004-2006
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▪ Adivar Honorary Award for Turkish Studies	2002-2003
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▪ Sydney M. Fisher Honorary Award	2005
▪ Samuel M. Melton Fellowship for Jewish Studies	2007
▪ Gordon P.K. Chu Honorary Award	2008
▪ George M. & Renee Levine Fellowship for Jewish Studies	2009

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- “An Apology would be a good start”, The Jerusalem Post, 12-26-2010
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- “Palmer Raporu: İdareimaslahatçılık Adalet Getirmez!”, Sabah, 9-10-2011

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ÖZET

Son yıllarda Irak'taki başarısız devlet örneği ve Suriye'deki iç savaş çerçevesinde dünya gündeminin merkezine otursa da DAİŞ, Ortadoğu'da operasyonel geçmişi olan bir terör örgütüdür. İdeolojik temelleri Afganistan cihadına kadar uzanan DAİŞ, El-Kaide'yi bile aşırıcılıkta geçecek ideolojilerini ABD'nin Irak işgali yıllarında temayüz ettirmiştir. Farklı isimlerle faaliyet gösterdiği Ortadoğu coğrafyasında Irak'taki Maliki yönetimi ve Suriye krizinin yarattığı boşluk sayesinde klasik terör örgütlerinden ayrılmış; Irak ve Suriye'de yadsınamayacak miktarda saha hâkimiyeti kurmuştur. Ayrıca diğer terör örgütlerine nispetle belirgin bir bürokratik yapıya sahip olmuş ve kendisini dünyanın en zengin terör örgütü konumuna sokan finansal kaynaklara erişme fırsatını bulmuştur. Diğer bir tabirle, Irak işgali yıllarındaki - özellikle "sehve" sonrası dönemdeki - nispeten sili görünümü, yerini Ortadoğu ve Batı dünyasının bir numaralı tehdit unsuru olma özelliğine bırakmıştır.

Irak'ta düşük profilli bir varlığa sahipken, Suriye'de önce El-Kaide'nin Suriye kolu El-Nusra Cephesi içerisinden devşirdiği militanlarla gücünü tahkim etmiş; ardından Suriyeli muhalif gruplarla çatışmayı tercih ederek saha hâkimiyetini genişletip rejimle stratejik öneme haiz noktalar dışında çatışmaktan kaçınarak kendisini Suriye coğrafyasına güçlü bir aktör olarak zerk etmiştir. Bu süreçte DAİŞ'in muhaliflerin savaşma gücünü azaltma, dikkatlerini dağıtma ve kamuoyunda itibarlarını zedeleme potansiyelini keşfeden rejim ve rejimle bağlantılı unsurlar da DAİŞ'le bir ortak yaşam formuna ulaşmıştır. Asıl ününe ise Irak'ın en büyük ikinci şehri olan Musul'u çok kısa bir süre içerisinde ele geçirmesi ile elde etmiştir. Musul'da ele geçirdiği askeri ve finansal kaynaklar DAİŞ'e sınıf atlatmış, buna paralel olarak piyasaya sürdüğü şiddet pornografisi sayesinde birçok yerel ve uluslararası aktör nezdinde baş düşman konumuna yerleşmiştir.

Bu süreçte DAİŞ'le mücadele hem yerel hem de uluslararası aktörlerin kendi kamuoyları nezdinde bir meşrulaştırma aracı olarak kullanılmaya da başlamıştır. Örneğin, Obama yönetimi kırmızıçizgi olarak ilan ettiği kimyasal silah kullanımından sonra bile askeri müdahale seçeneğini devreye sokmazken; DAİŞ'in Kobani gibi Suriye ölçeğinde stratejik açıdan önemsiz sayılabilecek bir kasabayı ele geçirmesinden sonra "DAİŞ'le mücadele" kapsamında diğer uluslararası aktörlerle birlikte Suriye'de hava saldırılarına başlamıştır.

Buna paralel olarak yerel aktörler de DAİŞ'le mücadele üzerinden meşruiyet kazanma rekabetine girişmiş; Irak'ta İran'ın nüfuzu altındaki Haşd eş-Şâbi milisleri, Suriye'de ise PKK'nın Suriye kolu YPG tüm problemlili ontolojilerine rağmen ABD'nin desteğini kazanmışlardır. ABD gibi birçok diğeri aktör önceliğini DAİŞ ile mücadeleye verilmesi gerektiğini vurgularken bu ortamdan PKK ve İran gibi aktörler istifade ederek hareket alanlarını genişletmişlerdir.

DAİŞ dünyanın dört bir yanından gelen yabancı savaşçıların katılımıyla militan sayısını artırmış ve Suriye ve Irak'taki en fazla militan sayısına sahip örgütlerden birisi olmuştur. Saha hâkimiyeti açısından Irak ve Suriye'yi birlikte düşündüğümüzde merkezi hükümetlerden daha büyük bir toprak parçasında varlığını sürdürmüştür. DAİŞ'le mücadelenin başlamasından bu yana saha hâkimiyetinde gözle görülür gerileme olsa da hâlen Suriye-Irak sınırının büyük bölümünü, Rakka ve Deyrizor'dan Fırat boyunca ilerleyip Halep'e ulaşan hattı, Irak'ta ise Musul'u ve sınırdan Dicle'ye kadar Nineva eyaletini kontrol etmektedir. An itibariyle DAİŞ'e karşı Irak'ta Musul'a, Suriye'de ise kuzeyden Rakka'ya, Tedmur'den Deyrizor'a yönelik operasyon hazırlıkları yapılmaktadır. ABD'nin başını çektiği uluslararası koalisyonun hava desteğiyle YPG'nin domine ettiği Suriye Demokratik Güçleri (SDG) Rakka'nın kuzeyi ve Halep kırsalında DAİŞ'le çatışma halindedir. Suriyeli muhalifler ise DAİŞ'le mücadeleyi ilk başlatan ve son üç senedir yoğunluklu olarak devam ettiren tek gruptur. An itibariyle Halep'in Kuzey'inde, Doğu Kalamun'da ve Dera'da DAİŞ'le muhalifler arasında çatışmalar devam etmektedir. Irak'ta ise Peşmerge Güçleri, Irak Merkezi Ordusu ve Haşd eş-Şâbi milisleri uluslararası koalisyonun hava desteği marifetiyle DAİŞ'le çatışmaktadır.

DAİŞ sadece Irak ve Suriye'de faaliyet gösteren bir örgüt değildir. Hızlı bir şekilde üne kavuşmasından sonra Libya, Mısır, Yemen, Suudi Arabistan, Cezayir, Afganistan, Kuzey Kafkasya, Nijerya gibi ülkelerden irili ufaklı gruplar DAİŞ'e biât açıklaması yapmıştır. Sadece Libya ve Nijerya'da saha hâkimiyeti olan örgütün Avustralya'dan ABD'ye kadar birçok ülkede sempatisini bulunmaktadır. Suriye ve Irak'a yabancı savaşçı çekmesiyle fazlaca konuşulan DAİŞ, özellikle uluslararası koalisyon saldırılarının başlamasından sonraki dönemde bu savaşçıların bazılarını köken ülkelerine geri göndererek Türkiye, Fransa, Belçika, ABD, Endonezya, Suudi Arabistan, Mısır, Libya, Yemen gibi ülkelere

terör saldırıları gerçekleştirdi. Bu açıdan baktığımızda DAİŞ, doğrudan örgüt mensupları veya kendisinden ilham alanların eliyle geniş bir coğrafyada terör faaliyetleri yapabilme kapasitesine sahip bir örgüttür. Bu da DAİŞ'le mücadelenin sadece Suriye ve Irak coğrafyasında değil koordineli bir şekilde birçok noktada yapılması gerektiğini göstermektedir.

DAİŞ ekranda görünmeyi örgütsel bir stratejiye dönüştürse ve Hollywood-vari yapımlarıyla terör faaliyetlerinin iletişimi açısından bir çığır açsa da hakkında bilmediklerimizin bildiklerimizden fazla olduğu bir örgüttür. Hakkında analiz yazmak için mebzul miktarda açık kaynak bulunan DAİŞ'i hakkında analiz edebilmek için maalesef açık kaynaklar iktifa etmemektedir. Bunun en büyük sebeplerinden birisi DAİŞ'in sadece doğal süreçlerle ve kamuoyuna açıklanan hedefler dâhilinde kurulmuş, genişlemiş ve faaliyet gösteren bir örgüt olmadığı konusundaki düşüncedir. Fikir babası Ebu Musab El-Zerkavi'den ilham alarak şiddeti ve operasyon metotlarını belirleyen DAİŞ'in Suriye ve Irak'ta girdiği pragmatik ilişkiler bütünü- ki bunun içerisinde rejimle yapılan işbirlikleri de yer almaktadır- DAİŞ'i anlatırken alışılmış ezberlerin dışına çıkabilmeyi de gerektirmektedir. Hiçbir zaman komplo teorileri kıtlığı yaşanmayan Ortadoğu'da DAİŞ'le alakalı dilden dile dolaşan birçok teori vardır. Lideri Ebu Bekir El-Bağdadi'nin kişisel bağlantılarından, DAİŞ'in yabancı istihbarat örgütleriyle ilişkilerine kadar uzanan bir dizi soru işaretinin belki de en önemli sebebi, DAİŞ'in bu kadar hızlı bir şekilde ve Ortadoğu'daki tüm paradigmaları alt üst ederek sansasyonel bir şekilde büyümesidir. Yine de DAİŞ'in özellikle Suriye'ye girdiği 2013 yılından beri ortaya koyduğu performans bu soru işaretlerinin en azından bir kısmında hakikat payı olabileceğine işaret etmektedir.

DAİŞ birçok bağlamda ele alınabilecek bir örgüttür; fakat bu tezde DAİŞ'in Suriye'deki varlığına ve Suriye'nin örgütün dönüşmesindeki rolüne ağırlık verilecektir. Yine de Irak ve ötesindeki varlığıyla Suriye'deki varlığı arasındaki kuvvetli bağ düşünülünce analizin Suriye dışına da taşması kaçınılmaz olacaktır. Zira DAİŞ büyük oranda bir Irak fenomeni olarak doğmuş, Suriye ise daha çok örgüt üzerinde dönüştürücü bir rol oynamıştır. Bu doğrultuda öncelikle DAİŞ fenomeninin tarihi kökenlerine değinilecek, cihadî gruplar arasındaki nüansların yol açtığı kırılmalara ve bu kırılmaların 2013 sonrası Ortadoğu'sundaki tezahürlerine bakılacaktır. DAİŞ'in Suriye'ye girmesinden sonraki

serüveniyle birlikte örgütün liderlik yapısı, militan profili, amaçları, metodolojisi ve ilişkiler ağına ilişkin değerlendirmeler yer alacaktır. Aynı zamanda DAİŞ'in Suriye'de 2011'den itibaren rejim ve muhalif gruplar arasındaki çatışmalardaki pozisyonu ve DAİŞ'in rejim-muhalefet denkleminde hangi kategori altında değerlendirilmesi gerektiği sorusu irdelenecektir. Analizin hazırlanmasında DAİŞ'e ilişkin birinci el kaynaklara ek olarak değişik metotlarla (yüz yüze, skype ve viber üzerinden, telefonla ve araçlarla) yapılan çok sayıda özel mülakattan da istifade edilecektir. Analizde saha araştırmasına özel önem verilmiş ve DAİŞ sempatanlarından Batılı analistlere, Suriye'deki askeri gruplardan El-Bağdadi'yi kişisel olarak tanıyanlara kadar farklı profillerde, farklı ideolojilerde ve bağlamlardaki birçok kişi ile mülakatlar yapılmıştır.

2013'te DAİŞ'e dönüşecek olan yapının temelleri Ebu Musab El-Zerkavi tarafından 1990'ların sonunda atıldı. Bu sebepten DAİŞ fenomenini hakkıyla anlayabilmek için El-Zerkavi'ye yoğunlaşılması gerekmektedir. Zira daha sonraki dönemlerde El-Kaide örgütlenmesi içerisinde de bölünmeye sebep olacak önemli hususlardan bir tanesi, El-Zerkavi'nin akait ve pratikte Usame bin Ladin ve Eymen El-Zevahiri çizgisiyle farklılıklara sahip olması ve bu farklılıkların uygulamalarda kendisine karşılık bulmasıdır. Bu noktadaki en büyük fikir ayrılıklarından birisi, daha çok Batılı hedeflere yoğunlaşma taraftarı olan Usame bin Ladin ve El-Kaide Merkez'in aksine El-Zerkavi'nin temsil ettiği ekolün daha çok farklı düşüncelerdeki Müslümanların ve özellikle Şiiilerin hedef alınması gerektiğine inanmasıdır.

El-Zerkavi, Ürdün'den Afganistan'a geçerek daha çok Bilâd-ı Şam'dan gelen militanları askeri ve ideolojik olarak eğitmek amacıyla bir eğitim merkezi kurdu. 2014'te Ürdün'de tutulduğu cezaevinden serbest bırakılan ve hakkındaki terörizm suçlamalarından beraat eden Ebu Katade El-Filistini'nin referansıya Afganistan'a giden El-Zerkavi, önce Cund'ul-Şam daha sonra da Cemaat Tevhid ve'l-Cihat (CTvC) isimleri altında yabancı savaşçıları örgütledi. 11 Eylül saldırılarının akabinde başlayan işgalle birlikte Afganistan'dan kaçmak zorunda kalan El-Zerkavi'nin tercihi ilginç bir şekilde ideolojik olarak düşmanlık beslediği İran oldu. İran bu dönemde ABD işgalinden kaçan El-Kaidecilerin kullandığı çıkış yollarından birisiydi. Örneğin El-Zerkavi'den bir sene sonra 2002'de Usame bin Ladin'in damadı Süleyman Ebu Geys de İran'a geçti ve 2013 yılına kadar İran'da kaldı. El-

Zerkavi'nin İran'daki ikameti Ebu Geys kadar uzun olmadı ve CTvC'nin merkezini Kuzey Irak'a Süleymaniye'ye taşıdı. El-Zerkavi Irak'a geçmesiyle birlikte anti-Şii gündemini yoğunlaştırabileceği bir alan da bulmuş oldu. 2003 yılında Şii din adamı Muhammed Bakır El-Hakim'e yönelik suikastın El-Zerkavi tarafından planlandığı iddia edildi ve İmam Ali Cami'nin önünde gerçekleşen bu sansasyonel suikast ve karşılıklı saldırılar ile birlikte Irak'ta mezhepsel çatışmalar daha da derinleşmeye başladı.

El-Zerkavi 2004 senesine kadar El-Kaide ile bağlantısını güçlü tuttuysa da örgüte ve lideri Bin Ladin'e biât etmemişti. 2004 yılında ise her iki tarafın da karşılıklı çıkarları doğrultusunda El-Zerkavi, Bin Ladin'e biâtını açıklayarak El-Kaide'nin organik bir parçası oldu. Bu evlilikle El-Zerkavi, El-Kaide'nin nispeten geniş militan ve finansal havuzundan faydalanıp eylemlerini genişletmeyi ummaktaydı. El-Kaide ise Irak'taki örgütlenmesini El-Zerkavi üzerinden yapıp, bu kritik ülkede de var olmayı amaçlamaktaydı. Biât sonrasında CTvC ismini Tanzim Kaide El-Cihad fi-Bilâd El-Rafizeyn olarak değiştirdi. Irak El-Kaidesi veya Mezopotamya El-Kaidesi olarak da anılmaya başladı. 2004'ten ABD hava saldırısı ile öldürüldüğü 2006 yılına kadar Irak'taki ABD ve Şii hedefleri başta olmak üzere, Irak'taki yabancı temsilcilere, El-Zerkavi'nin ülkesi Ürdün'e yönelik çok sayıda saldırı düzenledi.

2006 yılına gelindiğinde Irak El-Kaidesi, Ocak ayında Irak'ta cihadî direniş eksenini oluşturan beş grupla birleşerek Mücahitler Şura Konseyi'ni kurdu. Amerikan işgalinin şiddetlenmesiyle ve ABD'nin sahadaki bazı gruplarla müttefiklik ilişkilerini artırmasıyla birlikte Irak'ta mukim birbirine yakın amaçları paylaşan cihadî grupların birlikte hareket etme ihtiyacını gidermesi planlanan konseyin başına El-Zerkavi geçti. Bu konseyle aynı zamanda Iraklı gruplarla birlikte hareket ederek yerel meşruiyet ve destek kazanılması amaçlandı. Fakat Haziran 2006'da ABD F-16'larının hedef aldığı El-Zerkavi beraberindekilerle birlikte öldürüldü. Yerine Ebu Eyup El-Masri geçti fakat konseyin ömrü çok uzun olmadı. 15 Ekim 2006'da DAİŞ'e doğru dönüşümün kritik aşamalarından birisi olan Irak İslam Devleti Örgütü (İİD) ilan edildi ve başına Ebu Ömer El-Bağdadi geçti. Hakkında çok az bilginin olduğu El-Bağdadi'nin Irak ordusunun eski subaylarından ve isminin Hamid Davud Muhammed Halil al-Zavi olduğu iddia edilmektedir. El-Bağdadi'yle birlikte ileride daha ayrıntılı analiz edileceği gibi hem Iraklılık hem de Kureyşlilik

vurgusunda gözle görülür bir artış yaşanmaya başlamıştır. Bu iki vurgu üzerinden İİD hem Iraklılaşmaya hem de İslam dünyasının genelinde halifelik iddiası için meşruiyet zemini bulmaya çalışmıştır.

Bu aşama El-Zerkavi'nin nihai hedefinin hiç olmazsa kâğıt üzerinde gerçekleştirildiği, örgütten “devlete” dönüşme gayretlerinin de ilk adımını teşkil etti. Zira İİD'nin ilanından DAİŞ'e dönüştüğü zaman aralığında da İİD, kendisine “devlet” nitelikleri yüklemiş ve içerisinde yaşayan insan sayısından ve kontrole dilen toprak miktarından bağımsız olarak şemsiyesi altında hareket ettikleri yapının bir “devlete” tekabül ettiğini iddia edegelmiştir. El-Kaide Merkez ile ciddi bir tartışmayı da “devlet” meselesi tetiklemiştir.

El-Kaide daima göz önünde olmuş ve medyada geniş yer kaplamış bir örgüttür. Özellikle 11 Eylül saldırıları sonrasında küresel tehdit sıralamasının başına yerleşmiş ve örgütü yok etmek için Afganistan, Yemen ve Irak başta olmak üzere İslam coğrafyasında birçok yerde operasyonlar, işgaller ve askeri müdahaleler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu sebepten aslında sayıları onlarca olan cihadî grupları genelde El-Kaide çerçevesinde değerlendirme temayülü vardır. Fakat dünyaya, savaşa, diğer Müslümanlara bakışları farklı olan ve ancak asgari müştereklerde birleşebilen irili ufaklı grupların varlığından bahsedilebilir. Bununla birlikte El-Kaide'nin bu gruplardan önemli bir kısmını içine katıp bu gruplara liderlik ettiği de ifade edilmelidir. Daha sonraki dönemlerde de İİD'nin kurulmasından sonra olduğu gibi cihadî halkaların liderliği meselesi bir rekabet unsuruna dönüşmüş ve El-Zerkavi'nin çizgisindeki İİD oluşumu, Irak El-Kaidesini de kendi şemsiyesi altında toplayabilmiştir. Zira İİD'nin ilan edilmesinden kısa bir süre sonra Irak El-Kaidesi İİD'ye biâtını açıklamıştır. Bu biâta rağmen küresel cihadî halkaların liderliği konusunda rekabet devam etmiş, 2013'e kadar El-Kaide bu rekabette üstün taraf olarak görünse de İİD'nin DAİŞ'e dönüşmesi sürecinden sonra ibre El-Zerkavi ideolojisindeki İİD ve türevlerine doğru kaymaya başlamıştır. Bu sebepten 2013 sonrasında DAİŞ ile El-Nusra Cephesi arasındaki rekabetin ve hatta çatışmaların kökenleri 2006'larda hatta daha öncesinde de açıkça görülebilir.

İİD için 2007-2009 periyodu oldukça sıkıntılı geçti. Bu dönemde bir taraftan iktisadi olarak dışarıya bağımlılıklarını azaltmak için Irak içerisinde kaynak oluşturma çabalarına girerken

diğer taraftan da kendilerine sosyolojik taban olarak gördükleri Iraklı Sünni gruplarla sorunlar ve hatta çatışmalar yaşamaya başladı. Fidyeye için adam kaçırma, haraç toplama ve kaçakçılık faaliyetlerini hızlandıran İİD yılda yaklaşık 100 milyon dolarlık bir finansal güce hükmetmeye başladı.

Fakat aynı dönemde özellikle Anbar vilayetindeki Sünni aşiretlerin ABD desteğiyle başlattıkları ve temelde kendi yaşadıkları bölgelerdeki çatışmaların kontrol altına alınmasını ve bu yolda özellikle El-Kaide ve İİD gibi cihadî gruplarla mücadele edilmesini amaçlayan “sehve” başladı. Arapça ’da uyanış anlamına gelen sehve, Anbar Kurtuluş Konseyi çatısı altında birleşen gruplardan sonra birçok yerde daha yerel sehve konseyleri kuruldu. İİD için en büyük meydan okuma bu konseylerin sahada sosyolojik karşılığı olan Sünni aşiretlerden müteşekkil olması ve İİD’nin sosyolojik habitatının gittikçe daralmasıydı. Bu dönemde birisi sosyolojik diğer askeri olmak üzere iki büyük kırılma yaşandı. İlk olarak İİD’nin Iraklı Sünni kesimle arasında ciddi bir kopuş yaşandı. İkinci olarak ise liderlerinin yaklaşık %85’i hem ABD saldırıları hem de sehve konseyleriyle çatışmalar sonucu öldürüldü. Bu da birbiriyle ilintili iki sonucu beraberinde getirdi. Liderlik ekibinde bu denli büyük kayıplar yaşayan İİD askeri olarak oldukça zayıfladı. Örgüt içerisindeki yabancı savaşçılardan da kopmalar yaşandı. Sonuç olarak İİD’nin yer altına, uyuyan hücreler olarak gireceği bir dönem başlamış oldu. Diğer bir ifadeyle, DAİŞ’in selefi olan İİD’ye karşı mücadele ABD ve sehve konseyleri eliyle belli oranlarda başarıya ulaştı. Fakat daha sonraki dönemlerde de acı bir şekilde görebileceğimiz gibi İİD gibi yapıların neşet etmesine sebep olan unsurlara yönelik bir program ve mücadele ortaya koyulmadığı için dönemsel olarak yer altına inen bu grup gerekli siyasi ve sosyolojik şartların sağlanmasıyla birlikte tekrar gün ışığına çıktı.

2009 yılından Suriye’de protestoların silahlı çatışmaya dönüştüğü 2011 yılına kadarki dönem İİD’nin yeniden organizasyon ve planlama yaptığı nekahet yılları olarak kayıtlara geçti. Bu yıllar iki önemli süreç tarafından tanımlandı ve büyük oranda şekillendirildi. Öncelikle Kasım 2005 seçimlerinden sonra başbakanlık koltuğuna oturan Nuri El-Maliki ülke içerisinde hem siyasi hem de askeri gücünü tahkim etmesiyle birlikte otoriter ve mezhepçi bir politika tarzını yürürlüğe koyunca bu tarzdan doğrudan etkilenenler 2007-2009 sürecinde sehve konseyleri çatısı altında İİD’ye karşı savaşan Sünni gruplar oldu. Yer

altına çekilen İİD bu süreçte sehve liderlerine suikastlar düzenlerken aynı zamanda ise Maliki baskılarının yarattığı öfkeden istifade Sünni kesimle yeniden bağ kurma çabaları içerisine de girdi. Bu dönem aynı zamanda İİD'nin Saddam dönemi subay ve istihbaratçılarıyla stratejik bir işbirliği içerisine girdiği bir dönem oldu. Merkezini Musul'a kaydıran İİD, sosyal desteğini artırma, Saddam kalıntılarının askeri ve istihbari tecrübelerinden faydalanma ve Maliki baskıcılığına karşı savunucu grup rolüne soyunmaya başladı. Bu çabalarının her bir ayağı İİD'nin Iraklılaşma projesinin bir parçasıydı. Ebu Eyup El-Masri künyesinden de anlaşılacağı üzere Mısır kökenli iken kendisinden sonra gelen Ebu Ömer El-Bağdadi ve 2010'da İİD'nin başına geçen Ebu Bekir El-Bağdadi de Iraklı kimlikleriyle ön plana çıkacaktır. Ayrıca sehve sonrasında ayrılmayı tercih eden ve görünürdeki mağlubiyet sebebiyle Irak'a gitmeyi bırakan yabancı savaşçılar ironik bir şekilde İİD'ye değeri sonradan anlaşılacak bir katkıda da bulunmuş oldu. Yabancı savaşçı sayısının düşmesiyle birlikte grup içerisindeki Iraklıların oranı muazzam bir şekilde artınca, İİD “doğal seleksiyon” yoluyla Iraklılaşmanın da bir yolunu bulmuş oldu.

DAİŞ'in Suriye'de zuhur etmesi ve hızlı bir şekilde yayılmasıyla birlikte örgütün lideri Ebu Bekir El-Bağdadi'nin kişiliği üzerine birçok analiz yapıldı. Hatta ilk dönemlerde selefi Ebu Ömer gibi El-Bağdadi'nin de gerçek bir kişi olmadığı iddiaları bile ortaya atıldı. Fakat cihadî halkalardan gelenler için El-Bağdadi, El-Zerkavi veya Eymen El-Zevahiri kadar olmasa da bilinen bir isimdi. Çoğu cihadînin yolu El-Bağdadi ile Bucca Hapishanesi'nde kesişmiş, ardından İİD içerisindeki hızlı yükselişi ve Musul'un ele geçirilmesiyle birlikte dünya gündemine oturması da biraz şaşkınlıkla karşılanmıştır. Zira El-Bağdadi, liderlik yetenekleriyle ön plana çıkan birisi olmadığı gibi CTC'den İİD'ye kadarki cihadî-selefi örgütselliğinde en önemli kişiler arasında da yer almamıştır. Yukarıda da anlatıldığı üzere hareketin içerisindeki hızlı kan kaybı ve liderlerin operasyonlarda öldürülmesi sonucu El-Bağdadi'nin de yükselişi oldukça hızlı olmuştur.

Suriye'de Esed rejimine karşı önce barışçıl gösterilerin ardından siyasi kalkışmanın başlaması ve çatışmaların kısa sürede ülkeye yayılması İİD tarafından bir fırsat olarak addedildi. Sehve ile birlikte Irak'ta yer altına inen, yeniden organizasyon ve kök salma çalışmalarını devam ettiren İİD, yanı başında Suriye'de devam eden çatışmaları genişleme için kullanma kararı vererek, tedrici olarak Suriye'ye gireceği sürecin başlangıcını verdi.

Bu süreçte İİD militan havuzunu genişletmek için hapishanelere yöneldi ve 2012-2014 yılları arasında düzenledikleri baskınlarla cihadîlerin yoğun olarak tutulduğu hapishaneleri boşaltma stratejisi izledi. 27 Eylül 2012’de Tikrit’teki Tesfîrat Hapishanesi’ne saldıran İİD, 116 idam mahkûmu dâhil çok sayıda mahkûmun firar etmesini sağladı. 21 Temmuz 2013’te yüksek güvenli, ABD askerlerinin insan işkenceleriyle gündeme Ebu Gureyb Hapishanesine bomba yüklü araçlar ve ağır silahlarla saldıran DAİŞ, çoğu DAİŞ’in lider ekibinden olan 681 kişiyi kaçırdı. Aynı anda Tacî Hapishanesi’ne de saldıran DAİŞ, yaklaşık 60 tane güvenlik görevlisini öldürmesine rağmen mahkûmları kaçıramadı. 10 Haziran 2014’te ise Ebu Gureyb’den sonra Irak’ın en büyük hapishanesi olan Bâduş’a yönelen DAİŞ, buradan 2,900 tane mahkûmun kaçmasını sağladı. Bu mahkûmların 326 tanesi DAİŞ mensubuydu. Irak’taki hapishanelerden kaçırılan İİD/DAİŞ mensuplarının bir kısmı Suriye’ye geçerek, örgütün Suriye’deki örgütlenmesinde kilit rol oynadılar.

Suriye’de çatışmaların başlaması bir taraftan İİD için fırsat doğururken diğer taraftan ise potansiyel bir soruna da işaret etmekteydi. Sehve’den sonra nekahet dönemini atlarmaya ve güçlenmeye çalışan İİD için Suriye’deki çatışmalar aynı zamanda bir güç bölünmesi anlamına da gelmekteydi. Çatışmaların başlamasıyla birlikte İİD’nin militanları arasında Suriye’ye geçme konusunda tartışmalar başladı. Önemli bir kısmı Suriye’ye geçme taraftarıyken bu durum İİD’nin Irak’taki faaliyetlerini zayıflatacağından dolayı liderlik buna başta karşı çıktı. Hatta Suriye’ye geçmek isteyenler halkanın dışında bırakılmakla tehdit edildi. Fakat Suriye’de çatışmaların derinleşmesiyle birlikte savaşçıların Suriye’ye gitmesinin engelleyemeyeceği fikrinden hareketle Hacı Bekir yeni bir formülasyonla El-Bağdadi’ye gitti. Plana göre İİD içerisindeki Iraklı olmayanlar Suriyeli bir komutan önderliğinde Suriye’ye gönderilecekti. Savaşçıların bir kısmının Suriye’ye geçmek istemesinin sebebi sadece çatışmalara katılmak değildi; aynı zamanda İİD’nin üzerindeki dar grup tasallutundan bunalanlar, Suriye’de daha rahat hareket edebileceklerini de düşünmüşlerdi. Sıkıntı kaynaklarından birisi, İİD’nin Baas menşeli Iraklı bir grup tarafından üstü kapalı bir kavmiyetçilikle yönetilmesi idi. Bu noktada İİD önderliğinin ise önceliği, Iraklı liderlerin Suriye’ye geçmesini engellemek ve örgüt içerisindeki Iraklı dominasyonunu korumak olmuştu.

Bu planın kabul görmesiyle birlikte Bucca “diplomalı” Ebu Muhammed El-Golani liderliğinde Suriyeli bir grup Suriye’ye geçip El-Nusra Cephesi’ni kurdu ve kısa zamanda Kuzey Afrika, Körfez ve Avrupa’dan yabancı savaşçıları bünyesine kattı. Savaş deneyimi ve finansal kaynakları sayesinde kısa sürede güçlenen El-Nusra, Suriye’de müstakil olarak bir güç odağı haline gelmeye başlarken El-Bağdadi ve İİD liderliğiyle de adı henüz koyulmamış sorunlar yaşamaya başladı. Gruba yeni katılan savaşçıların El-Bağdadi’ye biât etmeden El-Nusra’ya katılması, El-Bağdadi’nin El-Golani’nin “paralel iktidar” kurduğunu düşünmesine ve buna engel olmaya çalışmasına sebep oldu. Bunun için önce El-Golani’ye mesaj gönderip El-Nusra’nın İİD’ye biâtlı olduğunu açıklamasını istedi; fakat El-Golani bu çağrıyı kibarca reddetti. Sebebi ise bu tarz bir biât çağrısının El-Nusra’nın Suriye’de artan popülerliğine ve Suriye devriminin geneline zarar vereceği inancıydı. Bu nokta aslında İİD ve El-Nusra arasındaki önemli bir farka işaret etmekteydi. El-Nusra’nın tüm Suriye’de bulmasının belki de en önemli sebeplerinden birisi, liderinin Suriyeli ve İİD ile ayrışmasından sonra kadrosunun da önemli oranda Suriyeli olmasıydı. Aynı durum İİD için Irak’ta da geçerliydi. İİD çizgisi kavmiyetçiliği, Sykes-Picot’un çizdiği modern sınırları reddetseler de Suriyelilik veya Iraklılık vb. gibi kimlikler önemli bir dinamik olmaya devam etmiştir.

Bundan sonraki süreç El-Bağdadi’nin El-Nusra’nın dizginlenmesine çalıştığı ve kendisine biât etmesi için bizatihi müdahil olduğu yeni bir dönemi başlatacağı. Bu çabaların sonuçsuz kaldığı noktada ise El-Bağdadi için Suriye’den fiziki olarak uzak kalabilme lüksü ortadan kalkar ve İİD’den DAİŞ’e dönüşüm süreci başlar. Biât mücadelesi olarak başlayan çekişme kısa sürede yerini tekfir furçasına ve silahlı çatışmaya bırakacaktır. İİD’nin DAİŞ’e dönüşüm sürecinin en büyük kırılma noktalarından olan bu gelişme ile kendisini Irak sınırları içerisinde tanımlamış ve daha öncesinde Iraklı savaşçıların Suriye’ye gitmesini engellemiş olan El-Bağdadi, Suriye topraklarına geçiş yapar ve Türkiye sınırına yakın Atme civarında güvenli bir evde oturmaya başlar. Öncelikli amacı El-Golani’nin de içinde bulunduğu El-Nusra liderleriyle yüz yüze görüşüp biâtlarını almaktır. Bazı El-Nusra liderleriyle toplantılar yapılır, fakat El-Golani birkaç defa çağırılması rağmen El-Bağdadi ile görüşmeye gelmez. Bunun en önemli sebebi El-Golani’nin suikasta uğrayacağını düşünmesidir. Bunun üzerine El-Bağdadi, El-Golani’ye bir mesaj göndererek El-Nusra’nın

yakında lağvedileceğini söyler ve bunu El-Golani'nin kendisinin açıklamasını ister. El-Golani çekinerek de olsa isyan bayrağını açmıştır. Buna karşılık olarak ise El-Bağdadi, El-Nusra'dan kopardığı savaşçıları da içerisine alarak 9 Nisan 2013'te El-Nusra'nın lağvedildiğini ve "Irak ve Şam İslam Devleti" ismini alacak olan örgütün kurulduğunu ilan eder.

DAİŞ'in ilan edilmesiyle birlikte Suriye'deki El-Kaide bağlantılı savaşçılar, El-Bağdadi'ye biât edenler, El-Golani'ye biâtını devam ettirenler ve ortada olanlar şeklinde 3'e bölünür. El-Bağdadi kendisine biât etmeyenlerin öldürüleceğini açıklarken El-Nusra'ya karşı iki boyutlu bir operasyona girer. İlk olarak El-Nusra'nın kontrol ettiği lojistik noktalar ele geçirilecek ve mühimmata el koyulacak; buna paralel olarak da El-Nusra'da kalan liderlere yönelik bombalı saldırılar düzenlenecek. Saldırıların ana hedefinin kendisi olduğunu bilen El-Golani, vakit kaybetmeden El-Kaide Lideri Eymen El-Zevahiri'ye bir çözüm bulması için başvurur. Bu başvuru aslında El-Bağdadi – El-Golani çatışmasını da yeni bir boyuta sürükleyecektir. El-Zevahiri, İİD'nin Irak'ta El-Nusra'nın ise Suriye'de etkinlik göstermesi gerektiğini, gerginlik ve merkeze danışılmadan hareket edilmesi sebebiyle iki grubun da hatalı olduğunu ifade eden açıklamasını yaptığında DAİŞ ile El-Kaide arasındaki bağların kopacağı bir süreç de başlamış oldu. Bu açıklamayı El-Nusra tarafında saf tutma ve Sykes-Picot'ya hizmet olarak algılayan DAİŞ ile El-Kaide Merkez arasında ideolojik ve tarihi temelleri de olan ilk açık çatışmalar başlayacaktır.

Çatışmaların önlenmesi için Mayıs 2013'te yazdığı mektupta El-Zevahiri, cihadî halkaların yakından tanıdığı Ebu Halid Es-Suri'yi DAİŞ ile El-Nusra arasındaki potansiyel çatışmanın ve mevcut gerginliğin giderilmesi için görevlendirdi. Ebu Halid El-Kaide yapılanmasında kıdemli isimlerden olup, Usame bin Ladin'le de yakın çalışmış birisidir. Suriye'de Ahrar'uş-Şam'ın kuruluşunda da görev alan Ebu Halid'in çabaları sonuç vermediği gibi Şubat 2014'te DAİŞ'in "karanlık" figürlerinden Ebu Ubeyde El-Mağribi'nin emriyle öldürüldü. Ocak 2014'te El-Kaide'nin ideologlarından Abdullah Muhammed El-Muheysi'nin ortak bir şeriat mahkemesi kurulması fikriyle yaptığı arabuluculuk çabaları da başarısızlığa uğrayınca DAİŞ'le El-Nusra başta olmak üzere diğer Suriyeli muhalif gruplar arasında makas açılmaya ve çatışma kaçınılmaz olmaya başladı. El-Zevahiri'nin

arabulucu olarak atadığı Ebu Halid Es-Suri, bu çabaların sonuçsuz kalmasında DAİŞ gibi yabancı savaşçılar tarafından domine edilen grupların istihbarat sızmalarına açık olması ve bu grupların farklı istihbarat örgütlerinin rekabet ve operasyon alanına dönüşmesinin etkili olduğunu söylemiştir. Diğer bir deyişle DAİŞ'in Suriye'ye zerk edilmesi ile birlikte muhalif grupları ortadan kaldırma gündemine yönelmesinin bir istihbarat projesi olduğunu ifade etmiştir. Ebu Halid'e göre DAİŞ Suriyeli muhalifler safında bölünmeler meydana getirmek için etkili bir şekilde kullanılmıştır. DAİŞ ile istihbarat örgütlerinin ilişkisi üzerine çok fazla iddia ortaya atılsa da ilişkinin doğası gereği tatmin edici kanıtlar henüz ortaya koyulamamıştır. Fakat DAİŞ'in içerisinde farklı istihbarat örgütlerinin sızdığı, bu isimlerin bir kısmının deşifre olmasıyla birlikte infaz edildiği veya Suriye'yi terk ettiği sahadaki birçok aktör tarafından dile getirilmektedir. Bu sadece DAİŞ'e özgü bir grup değildir; Ebu Halid'in de altını çizdiği yabancı savaşçıların istihbarat örgütleriyle potansiyel bağlantıları, DAİŞ tarzı yabancı savaşçıların bolca yer aldığı grupları sızmalara açık hale getirmektedir. Sahadaki aktörlerin DAİŞ'e sızan istihbarat elemanları olarak listelediği isimler arasında Deyrizor Güvenlik Sorumlusu Muhammed Rafi, Tabka Güvenlik Sorumlusu Ebu Musa El-Ensari, Halep Güvenlik Sorumlusu Ebu Usame El-Mağribi ve Esed rejiminin irtibat noktalarından Ebu Ahmet El-Havut yer almaktadır.

Arabuluculuk çabalarının boşa çıkmasıyla birlikte DAİŞ'in sahayı domine etmeye çalıştığı bir ortamda kritik bir gelişme meydana gelir ve El-Bağdadi'nin sağ kolu ve gölge adamı Hacı Bekir Ocak 2014'te Halep'te Suriyeli muhaliflerle yapılan çatışmada öldürülür. Hacı Bekir'in boşluğunu, yine Iraklı olan Ebu Ali El-Anbari doldurmaya çalışır. Hacı Bekir'in ölümüyle birlikte DAİŞ strateji değiştirir ve Suriye rejimiyle çatışmayı bırakarak, özellikle intihar saldırılarıyla Suriyeli muhalif komutanlara yönelir. Üç isim öldürülecekler listesinin başında yer alır: El-Nusra'nın Kadısı Ebu Maria El-Kahtani, Ahrar'uş-Şam'ın lideri Hassan Abbud ve El Kaide'nin ideologlarından Abdullah El-Muheysni. Bu isimlere yönelik operasyonlar başarılı olmaz. Fakat Tevhid Tugaylarının Komutanı merhum Abdulkadir Salih'in Suriye rejimi tarafından hava bombardımanı sonucunda öldürülmesinde DAİŞ'in rejime sağladığı istihbaratın büyük rol oynadığı iddia edilir. DAİŞ'in rejimle çatışmadan stratejik olarak mümkün olduğunca kaçınarak enerjisini öncelikle Suriyeli muhaliflere karşı harcamayı seçer. El-Bağdadi'ye biât etmeyenlerin tekfir edilmesi ile başlayan muhalefete

karşı mücadele sürecinde DAİŞ önceliğini Suriye’de gücünü tahkim etmeye, cihadî grupları kendi şemsiyesi altında birleştirmeye, saha hâkimiyetini artırmaya ve stratejik öneme sahip olan noktalar dışında rejimle çatışmaktan kaçınmaya verdi.

Bir zamanlar El-Kaide yapılanmasının içerisinde yer almış gruplar arasında farklılıklar bulunmakla birlikte özellikle mücadele metotları açısından iki ana fraksiyondan bahsetmek mümkündür. El-Zerkavi ve Bin Ladin (ölümünden sonra El-Zevahiri) çizgileri cihadî halkaların iki farklı yaklaşımına karşılık gelmektedir. El-Kaide’nin merkez yapılanmasını domine eden Bin Ladin çizgisi, mücadelenin “uzak düşmana” yani gayrimüslim işgalcilere karşı yoğunlaşmasının ve aşamaların (Örgütten hilafete) tedricen geçilmesinin yani bu yolda sabır gösterilmesinin daha doğru olduğunu düşünür. El-Kaide’nin 1990’lardaki ilk saldırılarının önce Yemen’de Amerikan askerlerine, New York’ta Dünya Ticaret Merkezine, Kenya ve Tanzanya’da Amerikan büyükelçiliklerine karşı yapıldığını hatırlatmakta fayda vardır. Özellikle 2003 sonrasında yani El-Zerkavi’nin Irak’ta resme girmesiyle birlikte “Rafizi” olarak adlandırdıkları Şiiilere yönelik saldırılar yoğunlaşmıştır. El-Zerkavi çizgisi olarak genelleyebileceğimiz bu anlayışa göre ise Şiiilere ve örgütün otoritesini kabul etmeyen diğer Müslümanlara yönelik şiddet de meşrudur hatta birçok defalar karşıt Müslümanlarla mücadele etmek öncelenmiştir. DAİŞ’e tevarüs eden bu anlayış sebebiyle DAİŞ şimdiye kadar büyük çoğunlukla Müslümanları hedef almış ve bu saldırıları sadece Şiiilerle sınırlı kalmamış Sünniler de yoğun bir şekilde DAİŞ’in şiddetine maruz kalmıştır.

Benzer şekilde dönüşümün tarzı ve hızı konusunda da El-Zerkavi gibi düşünenler Bin Ladin fraksiyonundan ayrılmış ve bu grubun mesianik dünya görüşleri mücadele metotlarına doğrudan yansımıştır. Hızlı sonuç odaklı hareket eden bu fraksiyon, asgari şartların yerine getirilmesi durumunda “İslam Devleti”nin ilan edilebileceğini düşünmüş ve 2006’da olduğu gibi bir devlet kurdukları zehabına kapılmışlardır. Bu noktada İİD militanlarının Irak içerisinde kontrol ettikleri cepler ve daha sonrasında Suriye’de ele geçirdikleri toprak parçasıyla birlikte Hz. Peygamber’in Medine İslam Devleti’nden daha büyük bir alana hükmettikleri bu sebepten bir devlet olarak telakki edilmeleri gerektiği şeklindeki mantığı dolaşıma sokmuşlardır.

DAİŞ hem girift ilişkileri, istihbarat örgütlerini andıran yapısı, örgüt boyutundan devlet boyutuna ulaştığı yönündeki iddiası hem de birinci elden gözlem ve araştırma azlığı sebebiyle hakkında yazılması en zor örgütlerden birisidir. DAİŞ'e yönelik mevcut literatürün DAİŞ'in örgüt ve insan yapısından ziyade ideolojisi ve geçmişine yoğunlaşması tesadüf değildir. Zira örgüt ve insan yapısı hakkında tatmin edici metinler yazabilmek için ya örgütün şeffaf olması ya da birinci elden araştırma yapma imkânının olması gerekmektedir. Mevcut şartlar altında ikinci opsiyonun oldukça zor olduğunu ifade etmeye gerek yoktur. DAİŞ'in gazetecilere ve ajan olarak gördüğü isimlere yönelik infazları dikkate alındığında Suriyeli muhalif gruplar arasında birçoğunu bulabileceğiniz gazeteci ve araştırmacıların DAİŞ'in kontrol ettiği topraklarda nadiren bulunmasının sebebi anlaşılır. Yine de DAİŞ mensuplarıyla ve Suriyeli muhaliflerle yapılan mülakatlar, DAİŞ'in sesli ve görsel yayınları ve şimdiye kadar sızan DAİŞ belgeleri, DAİŞ içerisindeki hiyerarşiyi ve örgütsel yapılanmayı, militan profilini genel manasıyla ortaya koymuştur.

DAİŞ an itibariyle Kuzey Halep kırsalında Kalcibrin, Kafr Kalbin, El-Rai, Suran, Dabık, El-Bab, Herbel; Doğu Halep'te Menbic, Cerablus, Meskene; Rakka'da Kuzey Rakka kırsalı hariç her yeri, Deyrizor'da merkezdeki bazı mahalleler ve askeri havaalanı dışında her yeri; Doğu Hums kırsalında El-Suhne, Cebel Şair, Tedmur'un bazı kısımlarını, El-Karyateyn ve Huveysis'i; Doğu Hama kırsalında Akirbat, Suha ve Selmiye'nin bazı kısımlarını, Şam kırsalında Batı ve Doğu Kalamun'da bazı noktaları ve Bir Kesb'i; Şam'da Hacer El-Esved ve Yermük Kampını; Dera'da ise batıda bazı noktaları kontrolü altında tutmaktadır. Diğer bir ifadeyle DAİŞ Suriye topraklarının yaklaşık %43'ünü direk ya da doğrudan idare etmektedir. Bu rakama DAİŞ'in kuvvetli askeri varlığı olmasa da DAİŞ'in nüfuz alanı içerisinde yer alan bölgeler de dâhildir. Bu oran muhalifler için %11, YPG için %14, rejim güçleri için %17 civarındadır. DAİŞ'in asıl eksenini Irak sınırından Halep'in kuzeyine ulaşan hattır. Bu hat boyunca DAİŞ militan, mühimmat ve diğer ürünlerin geçişkenliğini sağlamak ve farklı bölgelerdeki güçlerine takviye yapmaktadır. Haseke'ye kadar Irak sınırı boyunca oldukça güçlü olan DAİŞ, özellikle tarihi olarak kullanageldiği Kaim-Elbu Kemal sınır şehirleri üzerinden Irak-Suriye arasındaki irtibatı devam ettirmektedir.

DAİŞ'in Suriye coğrafyasında hem avantajları hem de dezavantajları vardır. En büyük avantajı Suriye'nin genelinde devam eden kaos ve çatışma ortamıdır. Daha önce de

anlatıldığı gibi DAİŞ metodolojisi gereği kaos ortamlarında gelişen ve yapılaşan bir örgüttür. Irak ve Suriye’de bu kadar yayılmasının başlıca sebebi de bu iki ülkede de merkezi otoritenin çökmüş olması ve toplumsal, mezhepsel ve etnik çatışmaların merkezi konumuna dönüşmesidir. Kaos ortamı DAİŞ’e çatışma yoluyla toprak kazanma ve mevcut topraklarını tahkim etme gücü verdiği gibi militan ve mühimmat bulma ve transfer etme konularında da kolaylık sağlamaktadır.

Suriye’de çatışan aktörler matrisi de DAİŞ’in en büyük avantajlarından bir tanesidir. Sahadaki en güçlü parti olan Esed-İran-Rusya üçgeni DAİŞ’le mücadeleyi öncelemediğinden dolayı DAİŞ diğer aktörlere karşı yoğunlaşabilme fırsatına sahiptir. Diğer aktörlerden birisi olan muhalefet zaten senelerdir aynı anda birden çok cephede birden çok aktöre karşı kısıtlı imkânlarla savaştığından dolayı oldukça yıpranmış durumdadır. Bir diğer YPG/SDG’nin ise ABD desteğine rağmen önünde ciddi yapısal sorunlar vardır. Bunların ilki YPG tarafından domine edilen SDG yapısının DAİŞ’in Suriye’deki kalbi olarak kabul edebileceğimiz Rakka ve Deyrizor’da demografik güçlü bir karşılığının olmamasıdır. SDG yapısındaki Arap unsurlara ve bazı aşiret bağlantılarına rağmen bu bölgelerin Arap yoğunluklu nüfusu YPG’nin bu bölgeleri ele geçirmesine şüpheyle yaklaşmaktadır. Bu da DAİŞ’e YPG’ye karşı bölge insanını mobilize etme fırsatı vermektedir. Bu demografik dezavantaj aynı zamanda YPG’nin doğal yayılma alanlarının çok dışına gitmesinin risklerini de beraberinde getirmektedir. Odak noktası olan Kuzey Suriye’den uzaklaştıkça YPG hem gücünde erimelere uğramakta hem de kuzeydeki insan gücünde azalma yaşamaktadır. Bu sebepten YPG uzun süre Rakka operasyonuna sıcak bakmamış, ancak ABD’nin iknası sonrasında operasyona başlamıştır. YPG kuzeyde DAİŞ’e karşı hava desteğiyle nispeten kolay kazanımlar elde ederken, güneye indikçe DAİŞ’in direnme ve püskürtme kapasitesi artmaktadır.

Bir diğer avantaj ise DAİŞ’in militan havuzunun çekirdeğini oluşturan kesimin mesianik beklenti ve motivasyonla oldukça adanmış bir psikolojiye sahip olmalarıdır. DAİŞ’in kayıpları sonrası kopmalar yaşanırken bu çekirdek ekip büyük oranda bağlılıklarını ve adanmışlıklarını sürdürmektedir. Bu psikolojik hazırlığa Afganistan, Bosna, Irak, Yemen, Libya gibi ülkelerde edinilen savaş deneyimi de eklenince karşımıza oldukça verimli bir savaş gücü çıkmaktadır. İstihbarat konusunda Hacı Bekir’e uzanan kurumsallaşmaları,

Saddam dönemi subaylarının örgüte kazandırdığı taktiksel ve stratejik manevra kabiliyeti ve şimdiye kadar stokladıkları mühimmat ile DAİŞ, Suriye’de direnme ve püskürtme gücünü halen korumaktadır.

DAİŞ’le mücadelenin metodu da DAİŞ’in hanesine bir avantaj olarak yazılmaktadır. DAİŞ’i var eden sebeplerle yüzleşilmeden DAİŞ’le gerçek manada mücadele edilebileceğini düşünmek en başta bu analizde anlatılan DAİŞ’in örgütsel tarihini bilmemektir. DAİŞ’in dönüşüm sürecinin işaret ettiği en bariz nokta, baskı, mezhepsel ayrımcılık, katliamlar, dış müdahale gibi süreçler devam ettiği müddetçe DAİŞ ve türevleri neşvünema bulacaklardır. Çünkü bu süreçler radikalleşmenin ilk adımlarını oluşturmakla birlikte DAİŞ ve türevlerine radikalleşme temayülü içerisinde olan kitle nezdinde varlık sebebi kazandırmaktadır. Esed rejiminin katliamlarının devam ettiği, ABD’nin YPG/PKK eliyle Suriye’nin demografik gerçeklikleriyle oynadığı ve insani krizin devam ettiği bir ortamda DAİŞ radikalleşmesi ve adam kazanımı da devam edecektir.

DAİŞ’in Suriye’deki en büyük dezavantajı ise ülkede Irak’takinin aksine kayda değer bir sosyolojik tabanının olmamasıdır. Irak’ta kendilerini Sünnilerin savunucusu olarak resmedip, aşiretler ve Saddam dönemi unsurlarıyla ittifak içerisine girdiğinden ve Iraklılaştığından dolayı sosyolojik bir taban yaratmayı başarmıştır. Nihayetinde Irak’taki Sünni grupların askeri kapasitesi oldukça kısıtlıdır. En etkililerinden olan Nakşibendi Ordusu eski gücünde değildir ve hatırlanacağı üzere Musul’da DAİŞ’le ittifak kurmuş ardından örgütle yollarını ayırmıştır. Fakat Suriye’de DAİŞ hemen hemen tüm çevreler tarafından yabancı bir unsur olarak kabul edilmektedir. Örgüt içerisindeki Suriyeli oranlarını artırmaya gayret gösterdilerse de hala %60 civarında yabancı savaşçı ağırlığı vardır. Ayrıca Suriye’de çoğunluk olan Sünni halk DAİŞ’e “Sünni halkın kurtarıcısı” şeklinde bir rol de biçmemektedir. Sadece YPG karşıtı hamlelerinde çekinceli bir destek vermektedir. Suriye halkının kendileriyle özdeşleşirebileceği, ideolojik olarak geniş bir skalada yer alan onlarca irili ufaklı grup vardır. Bu durum DAİŞ’in Suriye’de itibar görmemesine sebep olmaktadır. DAİŞ’i rejimin, İran’ın, İsrail’in bir “istihbarat oyuncağı” olarak gören Suriyelilerin sayısı hiç az değildir. Kısaca Suriye’nin Esed karşıtı halkı DAİŞ’i bir anti-devrim unsuru olarak görmekte ve örgüte itibar etmemektedirler.

Kısa sürede çok geniş toprakları kontrol eder hale gelmesi ve bir devletleşme sanısına kapılıp düşman saflarını sıklaştırması DAİŞ'in büyük dezavantajlarından bir tanesidir. Yaklaşık 35,000 tane savaşçıyla, Irak sınırından Suriye'nin içlerine kadar uzanan geniş bir toprak parçasını, Suriye'de muhalif gruplara, Türkiye'ye, uluslararası koalisyon ve YPG/SDG gibi yapılanmalara karşı uzun süreli müdafaa etmesi oldukça zor olacaktır. Bu süreçte muhaliflerin üzerine kurulan her baskı DAİŞ'e nefes alma fırsatı sağlayacak, YPG'ye verilen desteğin artırılması ise DAİŞ'in toplumsal direncini artıracaktır.

DAİŞ katı ideolojik formasyonuna rağmen kendini dönüştürme konusunda oldukça kıvrak bir yapıya sahiptir. Mesianik gruplar kehanetlerin çökmesi durumunda bile hayatta kalmaları ve iddialarını devam ettirmeleriyle bilinirler. DAİŞ de Suriye'deki ve Irak'taki toprak hâkimiyetinin erimesi durumunda organizasyonel anlamda dönüşümler geçirecek, birikimi ve yapısı gereği özellikle Suriye ve Irak'ta değişen ölçeklerde bir tehdit unsuru olma özelliğini koruyacaktır. Yeni şartlar DAİŞ'in yurtdışındaki hücrelerini daha da aktive etmesine ve Ankara, Brüksel, Paris saldırıları gibi eylemlerle gündemde kalmasına sebep olacaktır. Geri dönen yabancı savaşçılar fenomeni Irak ve Suriye dışında yaklaşık 80 ülkenin uğraşması ve çözüm bulması gereken bir sorun olacaktır. DAİŞ ise örgütün ideolojisini var eden siyasi, ekonomik ve dini şartlarla hakkıyla yüzleşmeden farklı isim ve formatlarda terör faaliyetlerine, kaos yaratma çabalarına ve Haziran 2014'te ulaştığı güç zirvesine tekrar ulaşma çabalarına devam edecektir.