

The Islamic State: Understanding What It Is, How it Started, and What It Could Threaten

By Savelly Zakharenko, July 22nd, 2014.



During June of 2014, a mysterious new radical Sunni Islamist and militant jihadist group significantly grew in power and attention as a major insurgent offensive swept throughout Northern Iraq. The group, which has been called The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham throughout its short but dynamic history, has recently declared that it is now to be known simply as “The Islamic State.” The group now envisions itself to be a restoration of the Caliphate¹, a massive Islamic empire that, at its height during the Umayyads, ruled huge swaths of territory from Spain to Pakistan; in its modern resurrection, the Islamic State’s Caliphate most simply refers to an extremist, theocratic Sunni absolute monarchic state in which extreme Sharia law rules supreme and its leader, the Caliph, is supreme leader. Such grand claims and majestic titles may seem

¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-declares-new-islamic-state-in-middle-east-with-abu-bakr-albaghdadi-as-emir-removing-iraq-and-syria-from-its-name-9571374.html>

slightly ridiculous and unrealistic in today's modern geopolitical atmosphere, yet the widespread media coverage and the startled voices of fear and unpredictability that follow them are not without cause. Key areas of the Middle East have been victim to rampant violence, war, disorder, and insurgency ever since and even prior to the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, but the bloody civil war ravaging Syria for the last three years, coupled with the final withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in late 2011 despite continuing political instability, has left the region susceptible to the growth of powerful insurgencies – such as The Islamic State.

The Islamic State (of Iraq and Syria) is led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (pictured below), the *nom de guerre* of Ibrahim al-Samarrai, now also known as Caliph Ibrahim. Not too much is



known about Al-Baghdadi, but it is believed that he joined the insurgency against the US soon after the 2003 invasion of Iraq². After various changes in leadership and the war's and subsequent occupation's tempo, Al-Baghdadi emerged as the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24179084>

2010³. He inherited an organization that was being targeted by the established Iraqi government and the last push of the US occupation; by the time the US exited Iraq in late 2011, a large number of AQI leaders were captured due largely to the US-sponsored militia coalition made up of Iraqi Tribal groups that became known as *Sahwa*, or Sons Of Iraq⁴. However, the Shiite-dominated government of Iraqi PM Maliki disbanded the militias, purged Sunnis from the government, suppressed Sunni protests, and sentenced the Sunni vice-president to death in absentia, causing many Sunnis to join what is to become ISIS, seeing it as the only group willing to fight in favor of Sunnis⁵. Al-Baghdadi, through an escalation of violent and high-profile attacks, returned the jihadist group to prominence; the Economist estimates that ISIS is responsible for about 75%-95% of attacks in Iraq in the first half of 2014, which has left at least 5400 people dead⁶. Al-Baghdadi changed the organization's name to ISIS as soon as it was announced that the group was now also operating in civil-war torn Syria, thus allowing it to grow independent of Al-Qaeda. ISIS aims to "control [its own] territory, dispensing its own brand of justice, and imposing its own moral code⁷. Shockingly, soon after the Al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Nusrah Front in Syria rejected a merger with ISIS, Al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly denounced and denied any connection to ISIS, causing the media to write sensationalist headlines such as "ISIS: An Islamist Group Too Extreme Even for Al-Qaida"⁸.

³ <http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/aqi.html>

⁴ <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604230-extreme-islamist-group-seeks-create-caliphate-and-spread-jihad-across>

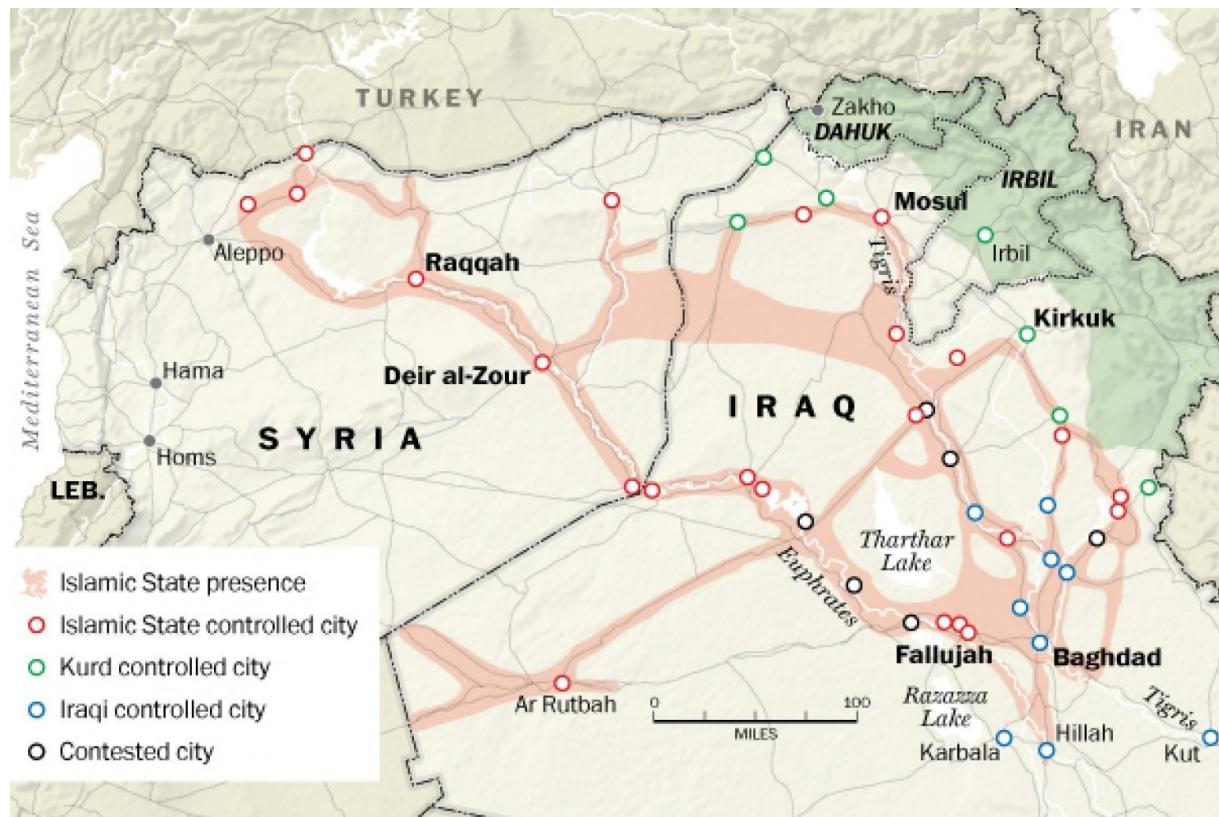
⁵ <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604230-extreme-islamist-group-seeks-create-caliphate-and-spread-jihad-across>

⁶ <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604230-extreme-islamist-group-seeks-create-caliphate-and-spread-jihad-across>

⁷ <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604230-extreme-islamist-group-seeks-create-caliphate-and-spread-jihad-across>

⁸ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/06/13/321665375/isis-an-islamist-group-too-extreme-even-for-al-qaida>

The Islamic State has been spreading rapidly throughout the region, and it now controls huge swaths of territory in north-eastern Syria as well as western and north-western Iraq following their quick capture of towns on the Syrian and Turkish borders, Raqqa, a regional capital in eastern Syria, major cities such as Mosul (Iraq's second largest city) and Fallujah (about an hour away from Baghdad), as well as a plethora of other territory in between the two countries (see map of controlled regions and cities below⁹). Most shockingly, however, is ISIS's



continuingly growing ability to wage jihad throughout the region; after the capture of Mosul, the group is believed to have over \$2 billion dollars in total assets after robbing banks and seizing plenty of military equipment and weaponry¹⁰. Recent captures of key Syrian oil fields on the Iraqi border, such as the al-Omar oil field, as well as control over a few Iraqi oil fields, has allowed the Islamic State to begin selling oil through the black market to further raise capital for

⁹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-appears-in-public-according-to-video/2014/07/05/73563772-0461-11e4-b8ff-89af3fad6bd_story.html

¹⁰ <http://www.cnbc.com/id/101761986#>

its campaigns¹¹. Apart from capital, ISIS is also growing with new recruits. Apart from a plethora of Sunni militants from the region, many foreign fighters from the West are making their way to ISIS's ranks. Several thousand foreign fighters from the EU, the US, and even Australia¹², including about a thousand more from the battle-hardened Islamic regions of Chechnya¹³, are believed to be answering the call to jihad in Syria, with most of them joining ISIS¹⁴.

Despite the fact that the international community largely did not predict the Islamic State's rapid expansions, actions have been taken to counter their growing influence. Although President Obama completed a withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq in late 2011, the recent crisis has caused him to send several hundred US troops back into the country. The Pentagon reports that about 750 US troops are present in Iraq as of the beginning of July 2014, along with detachments of helicopters and drone aircraft; these troops are tasked with providing additional security at the embassy, supporting facilities, and the Baghdad airport, while a separate 300 soldiers will serve as military advisors when they arrive¹⁵. A deal was agreed upon before the present crisis in which Iraq purchased 36 F-16 fighter aircraft from the US for around \$3 billion, but the first pair of aircraft are set to arrive in September with the rest gradually following up through 2015¹⁶; such a timetable for the deliveries is not fast enough for Iraq to deal with the insurgency, especially considering that the US personnel tasked to train Iraqi pilots are being evacuated, causing complaints from the Iraqi government that the US is delaying the delivery of

¹¹ <http://www.dw.de/isis-oil-and-war/a-17760035>

¹² <http://www.businessinsider.com/australia-is-major-contributor-of-isis-fighters-2014-6>

¹³ <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iraq-turmoil/rising-star-isis-has-chechen-background-fierce-reputation-n146466>

¹⁴ <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/19/world/europe/lister-european-jihadists/>

¹⁵ <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/obama-sending-200-more-us-troops-iraq>

¹⁶ <http://time.com/2863542/iraq-f-16-falcon-lockheed/>

the necessary weaponry¹⁷. Obama has, however, moved to sell another 4000 air-to-surface Hellfire missiles as well as a plethora of other ammunition to Iraq¹⁸. Furthermore, although Obama hasn't yet ruled out airstrikes against the ISIS militants in Iraq, he has yet to pursue such an option since senior US politics are calling on Iraqi PM Maliki to step down before such an option is implemented¹⁹. The US isn't the only country Iraq is turning to for help though. Since the US assistance isn't coming fast enough, Iraq has recently purchased 12 Russian SU-25 fighter aircraft, which the Iraqi forces have had experience using; Russian experts and planes arrived very quickly after the completion of the deal to help get the aircraft in the air as soon as possible²⁰. Iraq has also recently been in contact with their Iranian neighbors, with at least three, and expecting four more, SU-25 aircraft being sent to Iraq to help combat ISIS; Iraq would be violating international sanctions if they purchased arms from Iran, but Iraq claims that the planes are Iraqi-owned and had simply been in Iran for safekeeping ever since the First Gulf War²¹. Iran has also sent a fleet of surveillance drones, an intelligent unit, and Revolutionary Guard ground forces and air force personnel to areas in Iraq since the Sunni-ISIS insurgency claimed an Iranian Colonel's life near Samarra²². Even the Syrian government, in the midst of its own civil war, completed air strikes of ISIS targets in Western Iraq, a move that was welcomed by Iraqi PM Maliki. Syria's relationship with ISIS is complicated, however, as years earlier it had freed Salafi fighters that later joined ISIS, but the group not only fought the other rebels opposing Assad, but also served as a way to show that the Syrian opposition was made up of radical extremists; the Serbian opposition also claims that Assad has bought oil and gas from wells under ISIS's

¹⁷ <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2014/07/03/369707/us-delays-delivery-of-f16s-to-iraq/>

¹⁸ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-07-01/sale-of-4-000-u-s-missiles-to-iraq-said-to-be-readied.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/19/iraq-maliki-us-strikes-air-isis-sunni>

²⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/30/world/middleeast/iraq.html>

²¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/09/world/middleeast/iran-sends-3-attack-planes-to-iraqi-government.html>

²² http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/09/world/middleeast/iran-sends-3-attack-planes-to-iraqi-government.html?ref=world&_r=0

control²³. It seems that, because of the tremendous risk this highly resourced and threatening insurgency poses the Iraqi government, Iraq is willing to accept any and all kind of help.

The sectarian violence that Iraq currently finds itself is the result of a variety of factors, from the arbitrarily drawn borders that were initially formed by the colonizing British after the Ottoman collapse to the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq that plunged the country into a disorder susceptible to extremism and ethnic divisions. The growth of ISIS, now called the Islamic State, was a largely opportunistic insurgency that formed in between the Syrian Civil War, where it clashes with the Shiite-offshoot Alawite governmental regime of Assad and a variety of



opposition groups, and the instability in Iraq, where it opposes the growing Shiite dominance of Maliki's regime. The Islamic State, an extremist Sunni group, is able to call on support from the large Sunni minority in north-western Iraq and the Sunni fighters in Syria, who are becoming more and more disenchanted with Al-Qaeda's Al-Nusrah front. ISIS has, in the regions they now

²³ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/26/iraq-syria-air-strikes-isis>

control (part of their so-called Caliphate), imposed strict Sharia law²⁴ and executed thousands of Shiites and Shiite Iraqi military servicemen²⁵, but strangely their rule over Sunni populations is being welcomed as it provides greater security and stability than what was afforded before²⁶. The Islamic State's power, affluence, and widespread influence also allow it to significantly challenge other Islamic extremist groups, such as the old behemoth that is Al Qaeda. Richard Barrett, who headed the UN Monitoring Team concerning Al Qaeda and the Taliban, says that the declaration of the caliphate practically implies that “Al Qaeda should swear allegiance to *them*,” further building on their growing power and belief that “all Islamic groups be disbanded and their leaders pledge allegiance to Baghdadi”²⁷.

The Islamic State's significant territorial gains, including several massive cities such as Iraq's second largest, Mosul, has allowed them to grow in manpower, weaponry, affluence, and influence. Regardless of how ridiculous a “recreation of the caliphate” may seem, their successes demonstrate for fellow extremists that they are the most successful in achieving such gains... and that could be a massive problem. If Maliki's government fails to counter their advances, an independent Sunni state may form in the territory that ISIS controls, which would give way to a complete disintegration of Iraq into a Shiite state in the south, which the Saudis would be strongly oppose, and a Kurdish state in the autonomous north; the Kurdish Peshmerga, who are extremely capable and trained, have been able to keep the Kurdish north of Iraq stable despite the instability of the country, and the formation of a Kurdish state is now extremely possible²⁸ – a massive threat for Turkey's internal stability. The entirety of the Middle East is at threat for a

²⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-declares-new-islamic-state-in-middle-east-with-abu-bakr-albaghdadi-as-emir-removing-iraq-and-syria-from-its-name-9571374.html>

²⁵ <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/15/world/meast/iraq-photos-isis/>

²⁶ <http://www.vox.com/2014/6/20/5827282/iraqis-under-isis-control-say-their-lives-have-gotten-better>

²⁷ <http://www.newsweek.com/iraqs-isis-eclipsing-al-qaeda-especially-young-jihadists-257402>

²⁸ <http://time.com/2905812/iraq-kurds-isis/>

massive change and reorganization, thus severely altering the current state of affairs in the region and the world. Joschka Fischer, the former German foreign minister, warns that such changes and Islamist advances can pose two major risks for Europe: “returning jihadi fighters who threaten to bring the terror with them, and a spillover of their extremist ideas to parts of the Balkans”²⁹. Only time will tell if the Islamic State’s massive victories during the summer of 2014 can be sustained, or if they were the result of coincidence and luck; will the Islamic State’s caliphate continue to be a terrifying threat of powerful Sunni insurgent extremism as the instability in the region, fueled ever more-so by Maliki’s failures, the Syrian Civil War, and the conflict in Gaza, continue to develop? Or will the insurgency crumble on itself due to the common disorganization present in extremist groups as widespread international opposition it now faces head-on continues to mount? We shall wait... but meanwhile, keep your eyes open.

²⁹ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/joschka-fischer-argues-that-george-w-bush-and-barack-obama-must-share-the-blame-for-the-region-s-growing-chaos>