

The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (Levant) ISIS

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Abstract

This article argues that there has been a recent shift against radical groups in the conflict zones of Iraq and Syria, particularly the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham or Levant (ISIS). ISIS surfaced as one of the most prominent radical insurgent groups in Iraq and Syria. However, its imposition of extreme rules, suspicions over its actions and agenda, and clashes of interests within the group, have resulted in not only the local inhabitants but also other fighting groups turning against it. This paper investigates the origin of the group, its aggressive attitude towards other groups, the complexities of its entanglement in the region, and the Shia militia groups fighting it. Through all this, it tries to piece together the political puzzle of ISIS in the region. The picture that emerges is of a region characterised by political instability and sectarianism, but one where the influence of ISIS could be in decline as a result of its own actions.

Keywords: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Abu Baker Al-Baghdadi, Bashar Al-Assad, Jabhat Al-Nusra, Syrian civil war, Iraq's sectarian violence, Shia militia.

Introduction

A terrorist group operating across the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria, has attracted the attention of the international community for causing insecurity and instability in the region. The United States, the European Union and Middle Eastern countries are concerned about the spread of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. However, in Syria ISIS's ruthlessness (i.e. attacking civilians and even hospitals, doctors and humanitarian organisations) has caused other rebel groups and locals to turn against them (including the Western and Gulf State backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), expelling them from some areas in northern Syria (Gutman, 2014). ISIS's position is also weakening in Iraq, despite their ability to recruit large numbers of suicide bombers (Baker, 2014). US counterterrorism support for Iraqi efforts to fight ISIS, in terms of intelligence devices, Hellfire missiles and surveillance drones (Laub, 2014), and Prime Minister Maliki's shift to a reformist, conciliatory approach to the Sunni tribes in Western Iraq, has played a significant role in reducing ISIS's strength. The discussion and analysis of these facts portrayed the juncture in which the region finds itself today.

A brief on ISIS

The roots of ISIS can be traced back to al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), founded by the Jordanian extremist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Austin 2014). In 2006, when Zarqawi was killed by the US and Iraqi intelligence agencies, Abu Ayyoub al-Masri, an Egyptian, emerged as the new leader, espousing the cause an Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) (Freemen, 2014). ISI took

Islamic State of Iraq and Sham or Levant (ISIS)

shape from an amalgamation of the original AQI, the Mujahedeen Shura Council in Iraq and the Jund al-Sahhaba (Soldiers of Prophet's Companions). In 2010, the emir Abu-Baker al-Baghdadi, also known as Abu Dua, whose real name was Hamed Dawood Mohammed Khalil al-Zawi, established Baquba in Iraq as its headquarters (TRAC 2014).

Abu-Baker al-Baghdadi, who was of Iraqi origin, was announced as the new leader by the outfit after the killing of the former commander, Masri, by the US and Iraqi forces. Al-Baghdadi rebranded the outfit as the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant in April 2013 (Freemen, 2014). In his audio message on 8th April, he included Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) as well, which is a terrorist organisation active in Syria and affiliated to al-Qaida, as part of ISIS. He referred to it as an extension of the two merged affiliates, underplaying the JN leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani (Joscelyn, 2013). However, al-Julani denied the unification of his group with ISIS and proclaimed his allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the successor to Osama bin Laden in al-Qaida. Baghdadi's agenda appeared to be expanding the influence of ISIS beyond the borders of Iraq, in defiance of the al-Qaida's Central Leadership (AQC). However, after months of rows and disagreements between AQC and ISIS, al-Zawahiri formally announced the dissociation of AQC from ISIS (Sly, 2014). This clearly showed the impairment of ISIS leadership and emergence of radical autonomous groups within the outfit.

ISIS is not an ordinary *jihadi* group controlled or influenced by al-Qaida. It has its own conception and position, and has disobeyed the AQC and Zawahiri in several instances (Bunzel, 2013). It pledges allegiance to its leader Baghdadi, not Zawahiri. This is reflected in its *nasheed*, i.e. song of faith, which can be translated as:

We have closed ranks and pledge *bay'ah* to Baghdadi,
For our emir in our Iraq and ash-Sham (TRAC, 2014).

Khashoggi (2014) argues that ISIS is more of an idea or approach than an organisation. Moreover, while it is among the most extremist of the extremist organisations, its faith is based on seeking atonement for regimes and rulers who do not share its ideology and resist it.

The rupture between Baghdadi and AQC began right from the time the former succeeded Abu Umar al-Baghdadi in mid-2010 (Bunzel, 2013). On 15th June 2013, Abu Baker al-Baghdadi decried and rejected the order from Zawahiri to give up control over JN (The Washington Post 2013). As a consequence, a rift began between the two Islamist fanatic groups, ISIS and JN. The rift widened as almost the whole leadership council of ISIS, comprising 8-13 members, was formed by the Iraqi nationals, including former Iraqi officers from Saddam's regime. This information was revealed by a Twitter account which claimed to be exposing ISIS and al-Baghdadi (Mortada, 2013).

ISIS is based in Iraq with affiliations in Syria, and now in Lebanon. Its affiliate in Lebanon, established in 2014, is headed by Abu Sayyaf al-Ansary who has announced allegiance to the ISIS leadership. This group appears to have arisen in Tripoli in northern Lebanon, a fertile ground for its extreme ideology (Karouny, 2014). This shows the contagious effects of terrorist groups and their ability to exploit the vulnerabilities of the region, which is in the midst of one of the worst civil wars in modern history.

ISIS seems to have extensive funding resources, although it is difficult to state exactly where they come from. According to some experts, it generates a part of its resources from illegal black marketing and criminal activities in Iraq, together with robbery, kidnappings, extortions, and even arms and drug trafficking. According to the US-based Council on Foreign Relations, its coercive ways of extracting money from the locals have yielded roughly \$8 million from cities and towns, like Mosul and Anbar, in Iraq. Moreover, the group is also operating in Syria where it has managed to get a hold in some areas in the north and north-east, enabling it to control some oil fields and sell pirated oil (Petersen 2014).

According to TRAC (2014), it also has sponsors among unidentified individuals in the Gulf States. Its massive resources are reflected in its various operations carried out across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. ISIS mainly targets the Shias, Kurds and Christians, while its prime targets are of course the Western facilities and government institutions in these countries. The number of its fighters is not exactly known. However, according to the Economist's (2014) estimation, ISIS fighters operating only in Syria number approximately seven thousand.

Jabhat Al-Nusra (JN) roots

JN is an ultra-radical resistance group aiming to establish an Islamic state (Caliphate) in Syria (Bilad al-Sham or Levant). The outfit has a Salafi-Jihadist ideology (Benotman & Blake 2013) with its leader, al-Julani, being a Jihadist of Syrian origin. He joined AQI under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In 2006, after the killing of Zarqawi, he went briefly to Lebanon to support the Jund al-Sham militant group (another al-Qaida affiliate). On returning to Iraq, he was arrested by the US military and imprisoned in southern Iraq. However, after release, he continued his militant activities alongside al-Baghdadi and Islamic State of Iraq. Soon, supported by al-Baghdadi, he went to Syria and established JN when the Syrian uprising began in January 2012 (Ostaeyen 2013).

The position of ISIS in Iraq and Syria

Despite the overt clash between JN and ISIS in Syria, both share several common ingredients, such as ideology, objectives and even origins. Many have argued that JN was initially founded by AQI and its leader al-Baghdadi. However, although the fight between JN and ISIS is for authority and territory, Syria observers believe that JN is Syrian-centric and has slightly flexible relations with other rebel groups who have similar aims. ISIS, on the other hand, with its more extreme behaviour, has antagonistic relations with all other groups. While JN has direct relations with the al-Qaeda base, ISIS has disavowed it. Nevertheless, it seems that JN wants to keep a low profile for now, seeing the rejection of ISIS by other rebel groups and the Syrian locals.

A report by Aljazeera English stated on 13th January 2014 that ISIS and JN were fighting each other on many fronts. Furthermore, JN has been depicted by many locals and some foreign observers as a home grown group, while ISIS is seen as a group of foreign fighters with fewer Syrians in its ranks (Aljazeera English 2014). Significantly, an Islamic front, named the Syrian Revolutionary Front, was created in Syria on 22nd November 2013 by merging seven Islamist rebel organizations (Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Sham and the Kurdish Islamic Front) (BBC News Middle East 2013). These groups aim to fight ISIS and regain the areas under its control, in addition to fighting against the Assad regime (AFP 2014).

This factional fight between Islamist groups, mainly against ISIS, has altered the trend of the civil war in Syria. ISIS operations have been constrained by the backlash on its original bases in Iraq, at least psychologically. Interestingly, this intra-group fighting is for territory. Otherwise, a number of them have common ideology and aims, only differing in their sponsors and, to some extent, the ways in which they wish to implement their dogma. Moreover, they even include some moderate groups, like the Western backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is fighting against ISIS on many battlefronts in Syria.

ISIS's declining popularity is clearly discernible in the regions of Iraq and Syria in which it is operating. The outfit has carried out savage offensives against the locals. Its fight against other rebel groups like the Islamic Front and JN is because of its extreme interpretation of the Islamic Sharia laws. Its imprudent strategy has turned fighters in Syria

and Iraq against it. In general, the group has followed the policy of annihilating any resistance to its authority by terrorising other rebels groups, civil activists and journalists with cruel methods.

Iraq's enigma

In Iraq, which is its base, ISIS has exploited the angry and increasingly hostile mood in the predominantly Sunni areas, particularly in Anbar and Mosul, against the authorities in Baghdad. In the post-US withdrawal phase after 2011, the terrorist activities have intensified in Iraq. The Sunni political leaders and tribal chiefs are constantly clamouring that they are being marginalised, their cities neglected, and political leaders and activists targeted by de-Baathification and anti-terrorism laws. The promise of integrating their “al-Sahwa (awaking) forces” (established by the US military in 2006) with the Iraqi army remains unfulfilled. One of the prominent Sunni tribal leaders (Dulaim, the largest tribe in western Iraq) and cofounder of al-Sahwa (the awakening movement in Iraq), Sheikh Ali Hatem Suleiman, has openly expressed frustration at and disappointment with Maliki's policies since 2010, when Maliki was chosen as the Prime Minister for the second term. He argues that he is against ISIS, but opposing Maliki's way of governing, particularly the neglect and targeting of and discrimination against the Sunni leaders and politicians, has led them to protest against Maliki (Parker 2014, 17). Thus, Baghdad's alleged inconsideration of and discriminatory policies against the Sunnis have worsened the political division, resulting in the continued protests by the inhabitants of the western provinces. The continued and even escalating sectarian tensions and acts like the demolition of demonstration camps led to an all-out revolt against the government institutions on the eve of the New Year 2014 in the western province Ramadi. ISIS seized this golden opportunity and gained control over a swath of territories in Anbar province, especially its two large cities, Ramadi and Fallujah.

The tribal sentiment is generally against the central government across Anbar in western Iraq but it does not mean that all the tribes are coordinating with ISIS, although there is some sympathy and collaboration from small tribes and individuals. In fact, the Anbar tribal council has issued a statement rejecting ISIS's call for dialogue and reiterated that the tribes should support the Iraqi security forces (al-Shorfa, 2014). The Maliki government has responded to the turmoil in Anbar by providing arms and funds to the tribes in the province, and regenerating the “awaking” movement to restore the power of the government in territories under ISIS control (Morris, 2014).

However, the situation in Fallujah, the second largest city in Anbar, is more complex than in the rest of the province. A prominent “awaking” leader Sheikh Ahmed Abu Risha (one of the leaders of the Sunnis' sit-in against the Maliki government) announced on al-Arabiya TV that his people were confronting and fighting against ISIS. Meanwhile, Sheikh Ali Hatem Suleiman, has asserted that the fighting is between the tribes and the government and will continue until the Sunni demands are met. In the meantime, a member of the Tribal Revolutionary Council has announced that there are 300 ISIS members in Fallujah with 30 4x4 vehicles (Abbas, 2014).

According to Abbas (2014), besides ISIS, which entered the city from various areas from Anbar province and included some locals, there are three other armed groups in Fallujah. The first is the tribal gunmen who include fighters from the main Duliam tribe as well as other tribes like al-Bou Nimr, al-Farraj, al-Bou Issa, al-Fallaha, al-Jabour, al-Jamilat and al-Janabat. It is believed that Sheikh Ali al-Hatem al-Salman is leading them. The second are the assorted armed groups, forces that fought the US and later dissolved into various groups, such as Hamas-Iraq, Kataeb al-Ishrin, Jamaat al-Nagishbandi, Jaish al-Mujahidin and Baathist outfits. The third consists of the Salafi Jihadist organisations that, unlike ISIS, have

declared their allegiance to al-Qaeda. They have split from the ISIS leader al-Baghdadi who rebelled against the al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Among them, the most prominent group is Jaish Ansar al-Sunna. It is not clear whether these groups are coordinating with each other in Fallujah (Abbas, 2014). However, the city is besieged and preparations are afoot to intervene if the allied tribes are not able to expel the insurgents (Voice of America, 2014). The Iraqi army, equipped with US weapons and 13 Russian “Night Hunter” (Mi-28 NE) helicopters, is fighting ISIS in some areas of the city and its outskirts. Despite the bitterness of the confrontation between the government forces and the allied Sunni tribes on the one side, and the anti-government forces and ISIS on the other, a final assault to drive out the rebel fighters will most likely be carried out at some point. However, this does not mean that the eradication of extremist groups from the area will be permanent. One of the reasons for this is that there are some sympathisers who reject the new political system of Iraq, particularly its Shia-led government.

ISIS is confronting two regimes in Syria and Iraq, proclaiming both apostates because they represent the Shia crescent. It also projects the Shias as a threat to the Sunnis. While the Shias form the majority of the Iraqi Arabs, they are the minority in Syria. In the name ‘Islamic State of Iraq and Sham or Levant’, Sham or Levant means the Eastern Mediterranean (Petersen 2014). This shows the expansionist ambitions of ISIS in a region that has artificial borders which, it assumes, can therefore be legitimately eradicated. The group is not only anti-Assad and anti-Maliki, it is also against other extremist as well as moderate Sunni groups. Its aggressive terrorist program has provoked the local people in the Sunni areas, as well as other rebel groups, although it is also a fact that a few locals continue to support them.

As far as Iraqi Kurdistan is concerned, ISIS has carried out a rare attack against the KRG security headquarters (Asaish). As announced on the Twitter account of ISIS, this was an act of reprisal against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for its support to the Syrian Kurds (TRAC 2014). It was also meant to warn the KRG President Massoud Barazani for his threat of intervention to rescue the Syrian Kurds from ISIS massacres (Rudaw, 2013). It is noteworthy that the Syrian Kurds have been in a fierce fight confronting ISIS and have expelled them from many areas.

The Shia militia groups confronting ISIS

Bashar Al-Assad is an Alawite – an offshoot of the Shia Muslim sect. His regime has attracted many Shia fighters to support his exhausted army and has resulted in a remarkable flow of fighters from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and other countries in the region. Hezbollah, an Iran-sponsored Shia militant political party based in Lebanon and the strongest ally of the Syrian regime, has played the most prominent role in backing the Assad regime against the rebels, and fighting for it. The Hezbollah fighters are well-trained, ideologically motivated and experienced. As such, they have bolstered the Syrian military forces on many fronts on the battlefield.

Iranian military experts linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) also provide consultations to the Syrian army and train its units. The IRGC Chief Commander, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, was quoted by Press TV as saying, “We have already announced that we have specialist forces to transfer experience and training in Syria, who work as advisors, and this is public” (Globalpost, 2013). This is a very clear example of Iran’s entanglement in the Syrian civil war.

Concerning the Iraqi Shia fighters, although Iraq’s formal policy does not encourage or support sending individuals to Syria, there are a considerable number of Iraqi fighters

operating in Syria to support Assad. However, the Iraqi officials categorically reject Iraq's involvement in Syria. Maliki has reiterated in several speeches that supporting rebel groups will destabilise Iraq and encourage terrorism in the region (Al-bawaba, 2014). In 2012, the government spokesman, Ali al-Dabbagh, responded to the US warning against facilitating Iranian support to Syria through Iraqi airspace by saying, "Iraq will not allow any country to supply weapons or fighters through its lands or airspace to the conflicting parties in Syria" (CNN 2012). The highest-ranking Shia clerics (*marja*) in Iraq and leader of the Hawza of Najaf, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani, who commands massive loyalty, has also refused to sanction fighting in a civil war which he considers a political rather than religious issue (Fader 2013). Nonetheless, the Iraqi Shiite fighters in Syria are following the fatwa of the Iran-based (in the city of Qom) Shiite cleric (*marja*) Grand Ayatollah Kazim al-Haeri. Al-Haeri issued the first public religious edict permitting the Shias to fight in the Syrian civil war alongside the Assad regime (Zahra, 2013).

Hezbollah is using two groups, which it helped to create in Iraq, to train and recruit Iraqi fighters to be sent to Syria. These are Kataeb Hizbullah and Asaib Ahl-Haq, or the League of the Righteous, which was established by the Qudes forces in the mid-2000s to fight against the US forces (Blanche 2013, 15) and retaliate against the Salafists and Sunni extremist groups that targeted the Shias. Hezbollah is also assisting and coordinating with several Iraqi Shia groups in Syria, like Jaish al-Shabi (the People's Army), Liwa Abu Fadle al-Abbas, Kataeb Sayyed al-Shuhadda, Liwa Zulfigar, and Liwa Ammar ibn Yasser. These groups are well-trained and motivated, and usually take orders from Hezbollah and IRGC. These Shia militia groups in Syria form the tip of the spear for Assad's regime. The Iraqi Shia militia groups see the fighting in Syria against the Sunni extremist groups, including ISIS, as protecting themselves against the Sunni extremism (Blanche 2013, 16). The spokesperson of the Shia fighting group Liwa Zulfagar Battalion, Salam Safir, in an interview with Bas News in January 2014, asserted that it was supporting Hezbollah military wings, and that "their focus has been fighting against the radical Islamist groups such as ISIS" (Hussein, 2014).

The Shia militia groups in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon have played a remarkable role in fighting against ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups. However, these confrontations have also deepened the sectarian violence, whereby the Shia fighters project themselves as the protectors of the Shias in the region.

ISIS in the political puzzle of the region

To piece together the political puzzle in the region, it is important to analyse two contradictory camps of thought about who is behind ISIS and who employs them to further their interests. The first camp of thought, most prominently put forward by the authorities in Turkey, argues that there is coordination between Assad's regime and ISIS. According to Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, "ISIS is in league with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad" (Idiz, 2014). Furthermore, as told to Daily Telegraph (Sherlock, 2014) by some Western intelligence sources, al-Assad is collaborating with ISIS and JN, especially with secret oil deals, as these groups control some oil fields and sell oil to the regime. The camp's perspective includes the Arab Gulf States and the Syrian National Council (SNC). To reiterate this stream of thought, a report by al-Arabiya emphasised on 21st January 2014 that there was cooperation between the Assad regime and ISIS (Ismail, 2014). There seems a consensus in this camp that the Assad regime is cooperating with ISIS to hamper the moderate rebel advancement and to show the international community that all rebels are terrorists. Additionally, it asserts the historical relationship between Assad's regime and al-

Qaida, pointing out that the Syrian regime was facilitating terrorist activities against American troops in Iraq before their withdrawal.

The second camp of thought argues that ISIS, JN and other extremist groups are funded and supported by Turkey and some unidentified individuals from the Arab Gulf states. This argument is publicised by the Syrian regime, Russia, Iran and the central government of Iraq. However, Iraq's formal foreign policy is not to back any side, regardless of its point of view. The views of this camp are noticeably reflected in their broadcasting institutions, such as Russia Today, Press TV (Iranian Channel), etc. For example, a report by Press TV (2014) stated that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were sending weapons to SNC and other extremist militants fighting against the Syrian regime (Press TV, 2014). However, beyond this perspective, the ambiguities about the states, forces and prominent individuals who are supporting, coordinating and manipulating ISIS still remain. Its destructive fighters would not have infested the whole region without its loyalists and followers.

A joint statement by Barak Obama and Iraq's Prime Minister Maliki issued on 1st November 2013 acknowledges the danger posed by ISIS and asserts US support to Iraq in fighting it. However, it requires political reconciliation of the Iraqis, especially of the Arab Sunnis (The White House, 2013). Despite the spread of ISIS ideology in the region among its sympathisers and in areas with a fertile ground for extremism, it has conducted itself in a way that all states and prominent political parties are keen to disassociate themselves from it, even though some influential regional forces are certainly collaborating with and supporting them to further their own agendas. Although the information on its relations with states or prominent individuals is scarce, there are indications that it is trying to communicate with them to survive. This was evident in its appeal for help made to the tribes when it was besieged by the Iraqi army in Fallujah. It is also evident in its deals with the Syrian regime to finance its activities.

Conclusion

There are many signs that ISIS is increasingly weak on the ground where it was once the most powerful group across Iraq and Syria. It has become unpopular and is resented by local and regional forces because of its extreme implementation of the Sharia law, expansionist attitude that disrespects local cultures, intra-group fighting for authority and territory, and ambiguity and suspicions about its sponsors. To survive, it will likely use tactics and opportunities, such as a temporary truce with other groups or even with some local authorities, until it regains strength.

However, the ideology and agenda of ISIS, as well as its collaborators, have seen several ebbs and flows. The changing mood against ISIS in the region may well prove to be temporary unless there is reconciliation of the sectarian and political factions, along with fairness in the distribution of wealth and power. ISIS is not the only devil among dozens of extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, although it is the one that has caused the most turbulence and instability. The annihilation of ISIS alone will not lead to security and stability, unless the reasons that have created chaos in the region providing an opportunity to groups like ISIS to exploit the situation are themselves addressed.

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