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"Lasting and Expanding"

Over the years, members of IS and its various predecessor organizations have frequently been heard proclaiming *baqiya wa tatamadad,* or "lasting and expanding." This slogan concisely sums up the fundamental modus operandi of the IS organization, the roots of which date back to at least 1999, when its notorious father figure, Ahmad Fadl al-Nazal al-Khalayleh (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi) was released from prison in Jordan. Since then, IS and its predecessor factions have by and large met this simple objective, despite military challenges by the U.S.-led invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

1999–2003: From Jordan to Afghanistan

Zarqawi was released from Jordan's al-Sawwaqa prison after serving five years of a fifteen-year sentence for weapons possession and membership in the Bayat al-Imam—a militant organization founded in 1992 by the infamous Jordanian jihadi ideologue Issam Muhammad Tahir

al-Barqawi (Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi). Shortly after his release, Zarqawi moved to Afghanistan, arriving in Kandahar Province with a letter of *tazkiyya* (a personal recommendation or reference) from then-London-based Abu Qatada al-Filistini, an alleged al-Qaeda operative.[1] Upon making contact with al-Qaeda's leadership, Zarqawi acquired permission and a $200,000 loan to establish a training camp.[2] He used this camp as a base for building his own newly formed jihadi group, Jund al-Sham.[3] Within months, the group was renamed Jama'at al-Tawhid wa' al-Jihad (JTWJ).

Primarily consisting of Palestinians and Jordanians, JTWJ quickly attracted international attention for its December 1999 plot to attack Amman's Radisson Hotel and at least two other popular tourist sites.[4] The foiling of this "Millennium Plot" by Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate forced JTWJ underground until the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks. Zarqawi's JTWJ then emerged to fight alongside al-Qaeda and Taliban forces, eventually fleeing to Iran in December 2001.[5] There Zarqawi's followers were provided housing and given other assistance by elements linked to the Afghani militant group Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin. Shortly thereafter, Zarqawi's cadre relocated to northern Iraq with the help of locally based Ansar al-Islam.[6]

2003–04: Initiating Iraq's Insurgency

By the time U.S. forces invaded Iraq in March 2003, Zarqawi had established a small JTWJ base in Biyara in the Kurdish province of Sulaymaniya—which was targeted in the opening rounds of the U.S.-led air campaign in March.[7] This proved to be Zarqawi's initiation into a conflict that would come to define him and his fledgling militant organization.

JTWJ revealed its strategic intent in August 2003 with three significant attacks. The first took place on August 7, when the group detonated a car bomb outside Jordan's embassy in Baghdad, killing seventeen people. The second, on August 19, was a suicide car bombing outside the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq that killed twenty-two people, including the UN Special Representative in Iraq. Last, on August 29, the group targeted the Shi'ite Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf with another suicide car bomb, killing ninety-five people, including Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, the spiritual leader of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).

Naturally, JTWJ targeted U.S.-led coalition forces, but other attacks focused on Zarqawi's traditional enemies of Jordan and the Shia, whom Zarqawi viewed as the chief threats is to Sunni power in Iraq and the wider region. This three-pronged targeting strategy represented the path

to Zarqawi's ultimate objective: to undermine occupying forces while simultaneously sparking a sectarian conflict in Iraq. Zarqawi believed his organization could take advantage of the resulting chaos to cast itself as the defender of the Sunni community and to usher in the establishment of an Islamic state.

While partly influenced by the unique power politics of Iraq, the sectarian element of this objective was of particular personal importance to Zarqawi, as reflected in his writings. He consistently riddled his works with anti-Shia rhetoric, often mined from the words of historical Islamic ideologues. For example, he frequently quoted Ibn Taymiyya's well-known warning: "They are the enemy; beware of them; fight them, oh God, they lie."[8] In fact, in his final public address before his death on June 7, 2006, Zarqawi exclaimed, "The Muslims will have no victory or superiority over the aggressive infidels such as the Jews and the Christians until there is a total annihilation of those under them, such as the apostate agents headed by the *rafida*"—a derogatory reference to Shia Muslims.[9] Zarqawi demonstrated his personal commitment to targeting the Shia and sparking sectarian conflict early on by authorizing his second wife's father—a veteran of the group's Afghanistan days—to carry out the Imam Ali Mosque bombing.[10]

2004–06: Iraq Consolidation, al-Qaeda Tensions

JTWJ ramped up its operations from 2004 through 2006, adopting the use of multiple suicide bombers in mass casualty attacks. To an increasing extent, Zarqawi himself was feared for the kidnapping and beheading of foreign hostages, beginning with American businessman Nicholas Berg in May 2004. Because of its prominence and extensive international recruitment networks, JTWJ became the center of a growing jihadi umbrella in Iraq, incorporating other similarly minded groups. In September 2004, after eight months of negotiations, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.[11] From that point onward, JTWJ was known as Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, often simplified to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

However, Zarqawi's relationship with al-Qaeda was fraught with tension, particularly because of AQI's brutality and mass targeting of Shia civilians, a fundamental point of difference between Zarqawi and his masters in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Whereas Zarqawi thought society across the traditionally Islamic world had been corrupted and needed cleansing through terrifying violence, al-Qaeda had dedicated itself to combating "apostate" regimes and avoiding, where possible, tarnishing the image

of the jihadi project. This was famously revealed in letters from al-Qaeda leaders Ayman al-Zawahiri and Jamal Ibrahim Ashtiwi al-Misrati (Atiya Abd al-Rahman al-Libi) to Zarqawi in 2005.[12] Instead of pursuing fast results through dramatic and unforgiving brutality in the AQI manner, al-Qaeda, at least in the aftermath of the U.S. invasions, had called for a more patient strategy. At the same time, Zawahiri's 2005 letter did encourage AQI to prepare to establish an Islamic state in Iraq.[13]

AQI's sustained prominence continued to attract the support—whether ideological or pragmatic—of other Iraq-based insurgent groups. On January 15, 2006, AQI announced its merger with five other groups (Jaysh al-Ta'ifa al-Mansura, Saraya 'Ansar al-Tawhid, Saraya al-Jihad al-Islami, Saraya al-Ghuraba, and Kataib al-Ahwal) to form Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM), whose aim was to unite and better coordinate Iraq's jihadi insurgency. Zarqawi's death (along with that of his spiritual adviser, Sheikh Abd al-Rahman) in Baqubah on June 7, 2006, might have been perceived as a potentially fatal blow to the fledgling MSM, but it actually encouraged a strengthening of the organization. Within five days, AQI appointed Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (Abu Ayyub al-Masri) as its new leader, and four months later the MSM announced the establishment of al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq, or the Islamic

State in Iraq (ISI), with a fully structured cabinet. Then on November 10, Masri pledged *bay'a* (allegiance) to ISI leader Hamid Dawud Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi (Abu Omar al-Baghdadi).

Although it took years for the significance of these events to become clear, Masri's pledge of allegiance to ISI combined with the lack of any formal ISI pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda catalyzed a gradual divorce between the two entities. Through the late 2000s, al-Qaeda remained determined that ISI remain its subordinate, ordering it to attack specific targets, but by 2010–11, the relationship had eroded significantly.[14]

2007–09: Governance Failure and the Sahwa

The establishment of ISI was intended to represent a qualitative evolution whereby an insurgent group transformed into a military-political actor responsible for governing territory. By late 2006, it had reached financial self-sufficiency, raising $70 million to $200 million a year through a combination of ransoms, extortion, and oil smuggling.[15] However, as had been the case with AQI, ISI proved unwilling to compromise its absolutist ideology. Where it attempted to govern, this meant communities more often than not responded by opposing its presence. Put simply, ISI overestimated its

capacity to engender Sunni support and overstretched its forces, leaving them vulnerable to what was coming.

By early 2007, locally formed tribal *Sahwa* (Awakening) councils had begun actively combating ISI territorial control in Sunni areas of Iraq, particularly Anbar Province. Backed by U.S. and local security forces, these Sahwa militias—with their extensive local knowledge—proved effective at counterinsurgency. This shift in dynamics shook up the status quo significantly, encouraging ISI to lash out against rival Sunni insurgent groups and minority communities seeking to rid themselves of Sunni influence. This latter point was demonstrated on an extraordinary scale on August 14, 2007, when four ISI car-bomb attacks against Yazidi villages in northern Iraq killed nearly 800 people.[16]

Although ISI succeeded in assassinating Sheikh Abd al-Sattar al-Rishawi, the leader of the Sahwa councils, on September 13, 2007, the group came under extreme pressure in Iraq within a few months, owing in particular to the proliferation of its enemies. Consequently, many of its foreign fighters began leaving the country, and sectarian violence decreased measurably.[17] Indeed, the perceived threat from ISI diminished to such an extent that the United States lowered the reward for information leading to the capture or death of Masri from $1 million to $100,000 in May 2008, after reducing it from $5 million in 2007.[18]

Having operated as a model insurgent force in the mid-2000s, AQI, MSM, and ISI had initially been moderately successful, seizing territory and establishing localized mechanisms for governance. However, as such structures were by and large rejected by the surrounding populace, openings presented themselves for a traditional counterinsurgency strategy. Targeted intelligence-led strikes against ISI's various levels of leadership were complemented by a broader bottom-up fight, led by the Sahwa councils and backed by the U.S.-led coalition. Consequently, ISI suffered significantly during 2007–09.

2009–11: Restructuring and Recovery

While pressure on ISI continued through 2011, Sahwa efforts were weakened by the initiation of U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq from June 2009 to August 2010. The resulting transfer of security responsibilities to Iraqi forces dramatically reduced the Sahwa councils' capabilities and boosted ISI's confidence and local recruitment. Nonetheless, the pressure drove ISI into rapid operational learning. Amid the pressure associated with the Sahwa further south, ISI began in early 2008—with impressive speed—extensive structural reforms whereby it began "devolving" back into a typical "terrorist" group.

One particularly significant decision was to shift ISI's headquarters to the northern city of Mosul, where existing Arab-Kurdish tensions could be exploited. Initially, everyday ISI management in Mosul was led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi's deputy, Abu Qaswarah al-Maghribi. Following his death in October 2008, Maghribi was likely succeeded by Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani, the founder and current leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, now al-Qaeda's Syria-based affiliate.[19] The move to Mosul facilitated ISI's recentralization of leadership, with power focused around Baghdadi and two deputies. The national leadership thus directed provincial strategy but delegated responsibility for specific operational planning and an enhanced focus on income generation to provincial governors. This bureaucratic structure required tight discipline, something that was at the time even encouraged in public propaganda releases.

Throughout this period of quite substantial learning, ISI continued to exploit existing political and social divisions. With the U.S. military withdrawal under way, Sahwa militias were growing disenchanted with Nuri al-Maliki's Shia-led central government owing to its lack of support and neglect of wages. By mid-2010, ISI was offering larger salaries than the government's monthly $300 and was therefore recruiting more and more Sahwa members into its ranks.[20] By early 2010, ISI also sought to rebuild its

senior leadership, as thirty-four of the group's forty-two most senior officials had been killed or captured in the late 2000s, with only some being adequately replaced. To address this shortfall, ISI began launching well-planned, large-scale assaults on prisons holding its leaders.

ISI also shifted strategy, initiating an information campaign reemphasizing the legitimacy of its Islamic state project. In particular, it stressed Abu Omar al-Baghdadi's alleged membership in the Quraysh tribe, which according to Islamic tradition will produce the next caliph. Although Baghdadi was killed along with AQI leader Abu Ayyub al-Masri on April 18, 2010, his replacement as ISI leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is also allegedly a Qurayshi. Similarly, ISI at times compared its political and territorial influence with that of the Prophet Muhammad during his time in Medina, thereby claiming religious legitimacy.[21]

More practically, ISI accompanied this internal change with an escalation of attacks in many areas of Iraq, particularly Baghdad. During August–December 2009, ISI carried out three of the largest and most significant strikes on central Baghdad since 2003, killing at least 382 people. Although Iraq saw fewer such large-scale attacks in 2010, the frequency of multiple bombings began to increase, signaling a bottom-up revitalization of ISI's operational structure. Perhaps most crucially, ISI had become far more Iraqi.

This improved its social grounding and led it to design operations at the provincial and local levels with community dynamics in mind. Also ISI was now better able to acquire intelligence sources within the Iraqi security apparatus—something it has since exploited extensively. Nonetheless, the scale of ISI's leadership losses in 2010 meant its structure and operations remained in the realm of a "terrorist" organization, albeit one that was increasing its influence in a growing number of Sunni areas.

2011–14: Syria, Iraq, al-Qaeda, and a Caliphate

While the eruption of the civil war in Syria and ISI's expansion of operations into that country undoubtedly energized the organization's base, its recovery and expansion were clearly well under way before 2011. In early 2011, with the Arab Spring in full flow, ISI continued the expansion and professionalization that it had begun in late 2009. It significantly escalated its military operations in Iraq, both geographically, incorporating southern Shi'ite areas and the Kurdish north, and in scale, carrying out twenty to thirty attacks in multiple provinces, often within the space of a single hour. On August 15, 2011, for example, suspected ISI militants carried out twenty-two seemingly coordinated bombings in Baghdad and twelve other locations across

Iraq.[22] These intense and wide-ranging attacks aimed not only to inflict material damage on the government but also to diminish the morale of Iraq's security forces.

In July 2012, ISI initiated a "Breaking the Walls" campaign with a principal objective being the freeing of its many imprisoned members and senior commanders. Over the following year, ISI launched eight major attacks on Iraqi prisons.[23] Early on, the September 2012 attack on Tikrit's Tasfirat prison liberated 47 senior ISI leaders from death row,[24] while the campaign's finale was an assault on Abu Ghraib prison on July 21, 2013, that enabled approximately 500 prisoners to escape.

ISI also placed increased emphasis on collecting and exploiting vast amounts of intelligence, which proved hugely valuable as leverage over local authorities. This gave the group extensive influence across much of Sunni Iraq, which was advanced further when what was then ISIS launched a second twelve-month plan, Operation Soldier's Harvest (July 2013–July 2014). This campaign primarily aimed to undermine the capacity and confidence of security forces through targeted attacks and intimidation. Practically speaking, it entailed a 150 percent increase in "close-quarters assassinations" of security personnel and threats directed at individual commanders, soldiers, and police; these targeted attacks included the bombing of their homes,

drive-by shootings against their checkpoints and personal vehicles, and other similar acts.[25]

The three years since 2011 have been extremely consequential for ISI's dramatic evolution and growth into an organization capable of conquering and governing territory. Most significantly, ISI has expanded into Syria, exploiting that country's revolution and civil war.

ISI and its antecedents had maintained links in Syria since 2003, when recruitment networks, facilitated by Syrian intelligence, funneled fighters from the Arab world into Iraq through Syria. By 2007, according to the U.S. government, "85–90 percent" of foreign fighters in Iraq had come via Syria.[26] Therefore the emergence of a popular revolution in Syria in early 2011 attracted the attention of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who sent his operations chief in Iraq's Ninawa Province, Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani, to Syria to establish an ISI front.[27]

Jowlani arrived in Syria's northeastern Hasakah Governorate in August 2011 and began connecting with local jihadi cells across the country in order to establish what would become Jabhat al-Nusra.[28] Many of these cells had been formed by individuals released in a series of amnesties granted by President Bashar Assad, notably Decree 61 of May 31, 2011.[29] Jabhat al-Nusra then emerged publicly on January 23, 2012, claiming responsibility for a December

23, 2011, suicide bombing in Damascus that killed at least forty people.[30]

In the following six months, Jabhat al-Nusra operated in Syria similarly to ISI but insisted it had no links to ISI or al-Qaeda. Although Jabhat al-Nusra's targets were primarily government-linked, civilians bore the brunt, making the group unpopular with the Syrian opposition. In late 2012, however, this dynamic began to change significantly. By this time Jabhat al-Nusra had become a sizable militant organization, numbering perhaps 2,000 members, with particularly effective deployments in Damascus and Deraa in the south and Idlib and Aleppo in the north.[31] This expansion allowed Jabhat al-Nusra to transform itself from a typical terrorist group into an insurgent force, especially in the north. By mid-January 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra had led the seizure of two major military facilities in northern Syria—the Hanano barracks in Aleppo in mid-September 2012 and the Taftanaz airbase in Idlib on January 11, 2013—and cemented its reputation as a valued member in the fight against the government. In fact, when the U.S. State Department designated Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist organization on December 11, 2012, the theme of that week's Friday protests across Syria was "We are all Jabhat al-Nusra."[32]

This remarkable rise prompted Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to attempt to reign in his increasingly independent Syrian

subordinate. On April 9, 2013, Baghdadi confirmed in an audio statement that Jabhat al-Nusra was an offshoot of ISI and that henceforth it would be subsumed into the expanded Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Jowlani promptly rejected this edict, and despite several months of wrangling, Jabhat al-Nusra maintained its independence, leaving ISIS to gradually emerge as an autonomous component within the Syrian conflict. To assert itself, this new Syria-based ISIS force—initially composed largely of former Jabhat al-Nusra foreign fighters—began aggressively expanding across northern and eastern Syria. This quickly prompted opposition; while Jabhat al-Nusra had so far willingly shared power and governance, ISIS demanded complete control over society.

ISIS's July 2013 killing of a senior Free Syrian Army commander and member of the Western-backed Supreme Military Council in Latakia was the first sign of the inevitable. Six months later in January 2014, after many similar incidents, a coalition of moderate groups launched operations against ISIS across northern Syria, eventually forcing its withdrawal east toward Raqqa in March 2014. By that time, ISIS's refusal to submit to independent opposition courts and to al-Qaeda–appointed mediators had pushed Zawahiri to announce in February that "ISIS is not a branch of the al-Qaeda group, we have no organizational

relationship with it, and the group is not responsible for its actions."[33] Despite such losses, from 2013 onward, ISIS's unrivaled information operations, exploitation of social media, and adroit balancing of operational intensity in Iraq and Syria brought a renewed energy toward its cause of controlling territory and establishing an Islamic state.

Although the emergence of an anti-ISIS front in northern Syria caused the group to lose considerable territory in early 2014, the setback was temporary. Having consolidated ISIS's capital in Raqqa, its forces in Iraq exploited conditions in the Sunni heartland of Anbar to march into Fallujah and parts of Ramadi in January 2014. This marked ISIS's renewed venture into overt territorial control in Iraq and set the stage for its gradual expansion in Anbar, particularly along the Syrian border. ISIS then began a concerted counterattack against opposition groups in Syria's eastern Deir Ezzor Governorate in April 2014, focused along the Euphrates and Khabur Rivers. At this point, ISIS's operations in Iraq and Syria were becoming increasingly interrelated, with funds, fighters, and weapons crossing borders more frequently. It was under this emerging reality that ISIS led the rapid seizure of Mosul on June 10, thereby inflaming the wider Sunni armed uprising across Iraq.

To underline their accomplishments and goals, as well as to attract a wider following, ISIS issued a series of

coordinated media releases marking the start of Ramadan. The most significant of these was an audio recording, released on June 29 in five languages, that announced the establishment of the caliphate. On the same day the group published videos titled "Breaking the Borders" and "The End of Sykes-Picot" that showed the physical destruction of a land barrier demarcating the Syria-Iraq border and a militant touring a captured Iraqi border post adjacent to Syria. A July 1 audio statement in which Baghdadi celebrated the caliphate's creation was followed by a July 5 video of his first public appearance as "caliph."

While this dramatic and choreographed series appeared to attract considerable support among a new, younger generation of potential jihadis around the world, the declaration of a caliphate was an extremely bold move, particularly in view of its lack of Islamic legitimacy. According to Usama Hasan, a senior fellow at the Quilliam Foundation, part-time imam, and expert on Islam,

> An Islamist caliphate, by definition, covers the entire "Muslim World." . . . The hypothetical return of a Caliph in Islamic jurisprudence implies a large degree of Muslim unity, with these united Muslim masses willingly pledging allegiance to him. This is the fundamental mistake of [IS], a fatal flaw for their

theological credentials. They may have been entitled to declare an "Islamic emirate" (as the Taliban did in Afghanistan) or even an "Islamic state," just as Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Mauritania are '"Islamic republics." But to declare a caliphate for all Muslims when they rule over, at best, a few tens of millions Syrians and Iraqis out of a worldwide Muslim population of 1.2–1.5 billion, is to destroy any notion of Muslim representation or unity.[34]