

How Islamic State Ideology Contributes to Its Resilience

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Brief Analysis

The Islamic State's strategic understandings of geographic territory, time, and victory are critical elements in its potential for a resurgence.

Though the Islamic State (IS) has sustained serious blows over the past fifteen years, the organization has proven highly resilient, even expanding its territory and diversify its operations in 2020 and 2021. Considering the drastic impacts the Islamic State has had on the Middle East and beyond, understanding the way it sees its place in the world is critically important to current and future counterterrorism operations. Particularly concerning its potential efforts to expand in the near future, it is necessary to characterize the group's view of the general parameters surrounding its struggle, notably including perceptions of territorial gains and losses, persistence and time, and victory and defeats.

In characterizing these aspects of the Islamic State's operational ideology, it is particularly informative to examine statements made by IS leaders themselves. The rhetoric of IS leaders and spokesmen suggests that the Islamic State projects a unique self-image, battlefield perception, and set of criteria for success that differentiate it from similar organizations. Current academic literature on the Islamic State does not adequately address this unique perspective, and it consequently misses a substantial chunk of the organization's thought structure. As stated by former IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "to understand the Islamic State's program, its policies and Fatwas, [return to its leaders \(\)](#), statements, speeches and sources."

Notably, a strong and enduring understanding of time and victory—paired with a flexible and oscillating attitude towards territorial ambitions in its definition of victory—has allowed for a strong ideological cohesion even in territorial defeat. This consistent ideological cohesion can help explain the organization's lasting appeal for its members, as well as the potential for a future resurgence.

Perception of Geographic Space

Salafi jihadist insurgent groups uniformly aim to seize territory that will become part of the Dar al-Islam (the Domain

of Islam), within which the organization can impose its version of the rule of sharia. Yet depending on the stage of their insurgency, IS jihadists' perception towards territory has evolved, and this tendency has particularly manifested in five distinguished rhetorical shifts.

The first of these shifts was IS leadership's changing rhetoric on the territorial importance of Iraq. Leading up to 2006, the Islamic State had not expressed overt territorial ambitions there; at that time, Iraq was seen as an unimportant point of shelter and transit for Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and his Jund al-Sham organization. Although Iraq provided fertile ground for jihad after the early 2000s, al-Zarqawi's first public announcement after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, was encouragement for his fellow tribesmen to support [jihad in Jordan](https://archive.org/details/zarqawee_201505) (https://archive.org/details/zarqawee_201505). At that time, Iraq was not his priority. A decade earlier, al-Zarqawi's return from Afghanistan was "to [do something in the Levant](#) (https://archive.org/details/ZaQuawi_Likaa_06)[,](#) especially in Palestine and Jordan," he recollects. Moreover, land itself seemed to be unimportant in al-Zarqawi's rhetoric, as he said in an interview in 2006 that his organization [did not fight for a handful of soil](#) (https://archive.org/details/zarqawee_201505) or the illusory border of Sykes-Picot.

Yet, when chaos-ridden Iraq provided fertile ground for jihadist growth in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's fall, al-Zarqawi and the organization changed their wording to reflect their new reality, claiming that "the land of *Rafidayn* [Iraq] is [the land of the Caliphate](#) (https://archive.org/details/zarqawee_201505)," and in 2006, al-Zarqawi's successors [declared](#) (https://archive.org/download/Dwla_Nokhba/mjdawl.doc) the Islamic State in Iraq. As such, Iraq went from being a shelter for jihadist fighters to an arena of jihad itself.

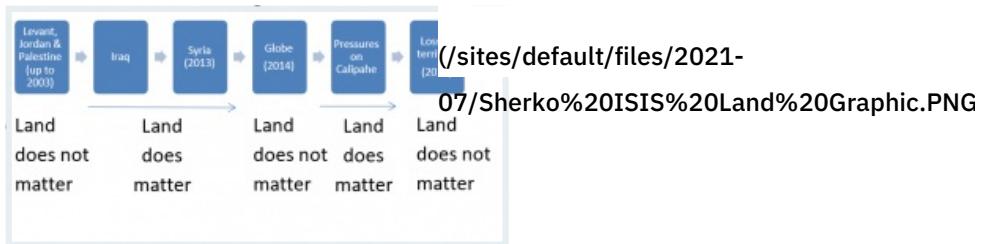
Following the shift in rhetoric on Iraq, IS leadership then made a second change in its expressed territorial ambitions, re-focusing attention on the Levant and Syria in particular. This shift is visible in former IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's reference to a [Hadith](#) (<https://al-maktaba.org/book/1755/2483>) in which he stated that "the Prophet [has chosen the Levant for us](#) (<https://shineofislam.com/16857/>)." In keeping with this rhetoric and capitalizing on the chaos brought about by the Arab Spring, the Islamic State entered Syria in 2011, and two years later, founder and Caliph of the Islamic State Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi publicly announced the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

This expansion across an internationally recognized border then brought about the third shift in the Islamic State's rhetoric regarding geographic space and territory, which was the development of a more global level of discourse. In June 2014, the Islamic State declared the return of the Islamic Caliphate, which ostensibly ruled areas extending between the Iranian and Lebanese border areas within Iraq and Syria. Al-Adnani would attribute the international focus on ISIS to this shift; immediately after the Islamic State talked about demolishing the Sykes-Picot borders and its expansion into Syria, its enemies, whom he describes together as "[the entire world](#) (<https://shineofislam.com/16857/>)," united against it, elevating the Islamic State's struggle to a global level.

In addition, the formation of geographically distant *wilayas* and far-flung IS operations further demonstrated the group's evolution from a local to a global organization. That is, according to al-Baghdadi, the fight of the Islamic State became the fight of [all Muslims everywhere](#) (<https://shineofislam.com/17134/>). At that point, being identified with a certain specific territory or geographic area became a limitation to the group's reputation, and so the Islamic State adopted a global and apocalyptic rhetoric to replace its prior localized territorial stance. In some ways, the organization had in fact returned to al-Zarqawi's earlier rhetoric from before the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate in Iraq.

This trend was to be short-lived, however. As anti-IS forces began to pose an existential threat to the territorial caliphate of al-Baghdadi, geographic territory regained its importance in IS leadership's statements, thus creating the fourth shift in IS rhetoric. Protecting the territory where the sharia of Allah was exercised [became a must](#) (<https://shineofislam.com/16780/>). Furthermore, according to IS leaders' statements, while the caliphate had to be protected, Muslims elsewhere had to engage its enemies and [divert the attention](#) (<https://shineofislam.com/16789/>) away from it.

The fifth shift then arrived when the Islamic State lost its territorial caliphate and the non-geographically based existential jihad regained its importance. In September 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stated that although the caliphate is lost, jihad of conquest is [increasingly widening](https://shineofislam.com/2017165/) (<https://shineofislam.com/2017165/>), and the IS jihadists conduct jihad in nearly a dozen wilayas regularly.



The evolution of the Islamic State's perception of space

In sum, the Islamic State's perception of territory has proven that it is subject to change depending on situational factors. Now that the group has lost the territorial caliphate, IS leaders deprecate the value of territory and assert that persistence of jihad is what truly matters. However, it is worth noting one caveat: throughout all these changes, the Islamic State's interest in Jerusalem, confirmed by comments from Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, Abu Omer al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, has remained unchanged, likely due to its significance and religious symbolism.

Stable Perceptions of Time and Victory

In contrast, the Islamic State's public characterization of time has remained unchanged. IS leaders have an apocalyptic view of their cause, arguing that the era of the Islamic State and jihad will last from the time of creation until the doomsday, or, from when Allah planned to create man to replace Him on earth until the fulfillment of His promise of granting earth to the true believers just before the doomsday.

The goal of the Islamic State, [according to al-Adnani](https://shineofislam.com/16834/) (<https://shineofislam.com/16834/>), "has always been to direct people to monotheism, to implement Allah's sharia, and to become one Ummah." In this sense, al-Zarqawi [vows not to back off](https://archive.org/details/zarqawee_201505) (https://archive.org/details/zarqawee_201505) until the establishment of the caliphate on the path of the Prophet—according to a [Hadith](https://dorar.net/h/e19a684b2a113046422005298533c44d) (<https://dorar.net/h/e19a684b2a113046422005298533c44d>), the last event before doomsday—and promises that "[the fight will go on](https://archive.org/details/zarqawee_201505)" (https://archive.org/details/zarqawee_201505), no matter whether it be against a Western heretic or an apostate, until the caliphate is returned." This view features in the Islamic State's slogan of "*al-Baqiyah*", or "lasting," and also illustrates the group's ideological framework that reinforces its beliefs in the face of territorial defeat.

This view also contributes to the Islamic State's conceptualization of victory, or lack thereof. While the granting of ultimate victory to the jihadists is a promise from Allah, the defeat of jihadists in battles are also equally promised—the Islamic State claims that these moments are presented by Allah to test the honesty of the Muslims' belief. The difficulty of the test is positively correlated to the degree of the Muslim's belief in Allah and His promise.

In this style of mental accounting, the Islamic State views both victories and defeats as part of Allah's promise to the true believers. The Islamic State's territorial losses, according to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, demonstrate that Allah's victory [will never come without testing](https://shineofislam.com/17102/) (<https://shineofislam.com/17102/>): "this is the promise of Allah to test and trouble His believers, and the pressures on the caliphate are [an episode of these tests](#)

[\(https://shineofislam.com/16797/\)](https://shineofislam.com/16797/)." These tests, he says, are part of "the most supreme Will, which will never change." In this narrative, also advocated by former IS spokesman Abdu Hasan al-Muhajir, Muslims, and particularly jihadists within the Islamic State, must exercise patience: "victory and patience are twin brothers [\(https://shineofislam.com/16816/\)](https://shineofislam.com/16816/) ... and no victory is achieved without persistence and commitment to His orders [\(https://shineofislam.com/16789/\)](https://shineofislam.com/16789/) and honest return to Him." According to al-Muhajir, patience and persistence are totally necessary to the believers, as they cannot rush victory against Allah's will: "Victory comes from Allah and has never been a result of abundance [\(https://shineofislam.com/16789/\)](https://shineofislam.com/16789/) of men and logistics ... it is purely a matter of Allah's will [\(https://shineofislam.com/17157/\)](https://shineofislam.com/17157/)."

Accordingly, this view of victory contributes to the way in which the Islamic State justifies its territorial losses. As stated by al-Adnani, "the fight is ongoing, and time changes [\(https://shineofislam.com/16905/\)](https://shineofislam.com/16905/). The Mujahids may lose a battle, a city or an area, but they never get defeated ... and they eventually triumph." Al-Adnani adds, "Does losing a city or a territory mean defeat? No, defeat is when you lose the will and appetite of fighting [\(https://shineofislam.com/16979/\)](https://shineofislam.com/16979/) ... Triumph, to us, is to live in the monotheistic way, to disbelieve in tyranny and to achieve Walaa wal-Baraa [loyalty to Allah and detachment from what Allah condemns], and to implement the religion. Doing so, we are triumphant however we might be."

Thus, in the words of IS leaders, the key lies in continuing the struggle and persisting in jihad, regardless of victory or defeat. This attitude demonstrates the potential for a resurgence of IS attacks and territorial ambitions so long as this perspective of its role is maintained.

Looking Forward

The Islamic State has a unique and well-established ideology, shaped by the statements of the organization's most senior leaders, that adapts well to their recent territorial losses. In this sense, looking forward, it will be necessary to address and understand the Islamic State's ideological practices in order to effectively combat any future resurgence. Understanding the lens through which the Islamic State views geographic space, time, and victory not only elucidates what pieces of its ideology are subject to change, but also explains why the Islamic State's jihad can spread to unlikely spaces, prove resilient even when under severe attack, and reemerge from its own ashes.

Over the past two decades, military operations have been the major tool against the extremist Salafi-jihadist groups in the Middle East. However, these options have only managed to eliminate ideologues, while the ideology itself has been allowed to remain as the backbone of these organizations' resilience and adaptability. Thus far, current efforts addressing the ideology of the Islamic State have not been as effective as they could be, partly due to counterterrorism forces' vague grasp of that ideology. Increasing resources towards counter-radicalization efforts and a better understanding of how to counter this ideological narrative will be key in order to strip the Islamic State of its ability to weave a compelling narrative and radicalize future recruits. ♦

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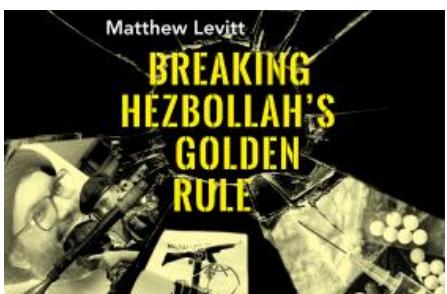
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