

The Islamic State of Iraq Attempts to Create a State in Syria and Iraq

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.

An expert on jihadist groups discusses whether ISIS will make more enemies than friends in Iraq as it continues its recent strategy of mixing violent repression with well-funded social work.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) recently seized control of wide swaths of northern and central Iraq. In Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, ISIS has issued a charter for how it will be run. Long before that the Islamic State was administering sections of Syria such as the city of Raqqa. This is a new turn for the organization, which is far more notorious for its terrorist attacks. To help explain how ISIS has tried to create its own proto-state is Aaron Zelin who is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and also runs [Jihadology.net \(http://Jihadology.net\)](http://Jihadology.net). He can be followed on Twitter @azelin.

1. You just wrote the article "[The ISIS Guide to Building an Islamic State](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-isis-guide-to-building-an-islamic-state)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-isis-guide-to-building-an-islamic-state>) for the *Atlantic* about how ISIS has tried to administer the areas it controls in Syria. Could you explain how it is going about doing that?

What I was trying to do in the article was to highlight that while everyone is very much aware of all the terrible things ISIS does in terms of criminal types of behavior -- whether it is the beheadings, chopping off hands, crucifixions, etc. -- ISIS has gained a level of support because it has been providing social services. For example, they've created religious schools for children, they have an administrative building, a complaints office, they're also involved with transportation, and a number of other things people would want from an administration.

2. ISIS is trying to do the same thing in Mosul now. Can you go over some of the things they are doing there like the code of conduct they issued?

I believe a day or two after they took over Mosul they issued a charter for the city. It's important to note that there were other groups involved in the attack that took the city. ISIS then released a charter for the city that laid out rules

that people needed to live by. The Islamic State, when they liberate a territory, they then believe it is their sovereign territory, and therefore everyone in it needs to follow their rules. The code talked about typical things like people cannot smoke, drink or do drugs. If people steal they will get their hands cut off. If people apostatize they'll get killed, whether it is a summary execution or a crucifixion. Women have to dress modestly (a euphemism for the full body *niqab*). It also highlighted that the Sunnis who worked in the Maliki government's institutions or military could repent and be safe, but as we saw two or three days ago they claimed they had killed up to 1,700 Shia soldiers. Then it posted a number of pictures of the gruesome nature of it. They lined people up in trucks and then shot them or had them dig their own graves and then shot them there with their Kalashnikovs.

3. The administration of territory appears to be a major change in philosophy and strategy from the old Al Qaeda in Iraq. AQI seemed to be just interested in sowing chaos and starting a civil war in Iraq, and that was their whole goal. Do you think they've learned lessons from how most Iraqis rejected them and how the Americans were able to take out most of their cadres?

I think they've learned that they need to have a soft power, hearts and minds type of strategy. Ideologically they haven't changed at all as we have continued to see with all the examples of violence and how they interpret Islamic law. Though we've seen in Syria and now on a smaller level in Iraq that they do realize they just can't alienate the population completely. They've reached out in Syria and in Iraq to local tribal leaders, and have even allowed people who were in the Sahwa movement to repent and join ISIS if they decide to. Otherwise they'll assassinate and kill those individuals as well. But they have definitely been able to try and implement these newer programs to ingratiate themselves better with the local populations. Part of it is that they had to do that in the Syrian context just to survive because there is so much competition with all the different rebel groups, whether it's the mainstream Syrian rebels, whether it's the radical Salafis like the Islamic Front or ISIS's competition with the other global jihadi faction Jabhat al-Nusra. So ISIS started doing more of this outreach with proselytization, social services, and governance type of actions. Then they've injected that back into Iraq although on a smaller level. It is likely that with the new resources they've taken over along with the alleged amount of money they got from Mosul's central bank, they will use that for not only their military aspects, but also in terms of pushing their soft power programs as well.

4. Right before ISIS's big victories in Iraq in June there were reports that it was getting into conflicts with the Baathists and Ansar al-Islam with tit for tat killings and such. Do you think with ISIS now trying to impose administration over certain areas that those kinds of conflicts will increase in the future?

Yes, ISIS doesn't submit to the will of anyone, not even Al Qaeda for that matter. While they might have had a marriage of convenience with other insurgents that have been involved in taking over some of these villages and cities, ISIS is not going to listen to anybody and they're not going to want any type of power sharing deal with anybody. They've already had issues with Ansar al-Islam going back at least a year, and of course they're not going to like the Baathists. I imagine if ISIS is able to consolidate their hold that you'll start seeing in-fighting between the insurgents just as we've seen in the Syrian context. We saw this in the last decade as well when they were Al Qaeda in Iraq and they were fighting not just the Shia and the Americans, but also other insurgent factions as well. Based on their past, based on what we've seen in Syria, based on how we know they operate, it is definitely likely we will see more conflicts, and that will continue to add to the list of enemies they have in the region overall. ❖

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