

Al-Qaeda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part I)

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Brief Analysis

This two-part PolicyWatch assesses how ISIS has gained a foothold in Syria by learning from past jihadist mistakes in Iraq. Part I discusses the group's recent successes; ***Part II discusses jihadist mistakes in other countries and whether ISIS is repeating them (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-in-syria-a-closer-look-at-isis-part-ii>).***

In August, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) bolstered its growing reputation as a key player in the jihad against the Syrian regime, participating in the takeover of Minakh air base in Aleppo governorate, the offensive in the regime heartland of Latakia, and other operations. Similar to Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), the other al-Qaeda-aligned group currently fighting in Syria, ISIS has attempted to ingratiate itself to the local populace through *dawa* (missionary activities) and other social outreach. Whether or not this adaptation is sustainable remains to be seen, but up to this point, ISIS has kept itself in check and made progress on the ground.

THE EVOLUTION FROM AQI TO ISIS

Following the U.S.-led invasion to topple Saddam Hussein, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, became a critical force in the anti-American insurgency and sectarian war that began to unfold in 2004. AQI was known not just for its prowess on the battlefield, but also for its butchery and oppression, which included killing Sunni and Shiite civilians with spectacular suicide attacks, bombing Shiite mosques, uploading videos of beheadings on jihadist forums, and forcing local Sunnis to abide by its interpretation of Islamic law.

These actions spurred backlash within Sunni enclaves, which later formed the *sahwa* (awakening) militia groups that often partnered with U.S. forces during the 2007 "surge." AQI's actions also troubled al-Qaeda Central (AQC) in Pakistan, spurring senior members of the parent group to speak out. In 2005, Zarqawi received two letters from Ayman al-Zawahiri (then the deputy head of AQC and now its leader) and Sheikh Atiyah Abd al-Rahman al-Libi (a senior AQC ideologue and operations leader who was later killed in a 2011 drone strike). They advised him to tone down the violence and over-the-top enforcement of sharia, which they correctly argued was alienating Sunnis and hurting the long-term goals of the global jihadist project. Indeed, AQI eventually lost major support and became stigmatized within the insurgency and the Sunni community.

In 2012, however, AQI -- which renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) after Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. strike

in 2006 -- began to bounce back. One of the factors that led to this resurgence was the Syrian uprising. In late summer 2011, ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi dispatched operatives to Syria to set up a new jihadist organization. Among them was Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, the leader of what would become JN, which officially announced itself in late January 2012. By November 2012, Jawlani had built JN into one of the opposition's best fighting forces, and locals viewed its members as fair arbiters when dealing with corruption and social services.

Due to these successes, Baghdadi changed the name of his group from ISI to ISIS in April 2013. He likely believed that it was acceptable to publicly announce what was already known: that JN and ISI were one and the same. Yet this did not sit well with Jawlani -- he rebuffed the change and reaffirmed his allegiance to AQC chief Zawahiri, who later tried (and failed) to nullify Baghdadi's power play. Amid the confusion, many Syrian jihadists left JN for ISIS, while Baghdadi himself moved from Iraq and established a base in Syria, according to the State Department. ISIS also began to attract a growing number of foreign fighters.

Therefore, contrary to the media narrative that JN merged with ISIS, the two groups actually separated. JN still exists, but the quick ascendancy of ISIS has apparently made it the more-dominant group for now. Further, unlike Zarqawi's AQI at its height, most of the ISIS fighters battling the Assad regime are Syrians, not foreigners.

LESSONS LEARNED

Although many within ISIS and the wider jihadist movement readily admit that some mistakes were made in Iraq during the past decade, they still view the jihad as being fruitful. Yet al-Qaeda groups in other arenas -- such as Yemeni affiliate al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) -- have used tactics that are far more sensitive to the local populace, targeting only security elements, not Sunni civilians. When AQAP took over parts of southern Yemen in spring 2011, it also provided some level of governance and social services until it was pushed out by government forces in summer 2012.

In Syria (if not Iraq), ISIS appears to be learning this lesson, and its rhetoric and actions are evolving. For example, in a July 30 video message titled "They Will Not Harm You Except for Some Annoyance" (a reference to a Quranic verse), senior ISIS ideologue Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani attempted to cast the group's past stumbles in a sympathetic light: "As for our mistakes, we do not deny them. Rather, we will continue to make mistakes as long as we are humans. God forbid that we commit mistakes deliberately. Anyone who seeks leaders and mujahedin who work without mistakes will never find them. And those who work will make mistakes, while those that sit back and watch won't make mistakes...So how could they blame and criticize us for something that humans are compelled to do, and that they have been born with?"

A CHARM OFFENSIVE

Since late May, ISIS has sought to cultivate a base of support in Aleppo and Raqqa governorates, and to a lesser extent in Damascus and Deir al-Zour. One of the main ways it has gone about this is through *dawa* forums in neighborhood squares. In Aleppo, al-Bab, al-Dana, Jarabulus, Azaz, and other cities, ISIS speakers frequently exhort people on the virtues of jihad and fighting the Assad regime, sometimes balancing the speeches with fun, fair-like activities like tug-of-war competitions.

In addition, the group has interacted with children in order to curry favor. At one forum, local boys sang a jihadist *nashid* (religiously sanctioned vocal chant). Children have also been invited to participate in pie- and cantaloupe-eating contests and a Quranic recitation competition. In al-Tabqa, ISIS members even gave presents to children during Eid al-Fitr at the end of Ramadan. And many of the group's videos feature kids talking about the ills of the "Nusayri" (a derogatory term for Alawite) regime and the valor of mujahedin. In short, ISIS seems to realize that winning the long war requires gaining the trust and support of children.

Besides light-hearted activities aimed at endearing themselves to the people, ISIS members have also provided aid to civilian protestors in Damascus, free medical services to locals in Jarabulus, bags of food to the needy in rural Aleppo, and below-market fuel to residents in Deir al-Zour governorate. These materials have been branded with the group's black flag, illustrating that ISIS has significant organizational and financial resources as well as a clear intent to publicize its charitable aims. The group has also put up billboards in various areas to reinforce its *dawa* message, bearing slogans such as "Yes to the rule of sharia in Manbij."

Through these and other types of soft-power outreach, ISIS is attempting to lay the groundwork for a future Islamic state by gradually socializing Syrians to the concept. This is a clear departure from the over-the-top enforcement of narrow sharia interpretations seen in western Iraq over the past decade. Of course, such outreach can only go so far in cases where jihadists do not control the territory in question, so the group's approach and effectiveness could change if the situation on the ground shifts.

CONCLUSION

Over the past four months, ISIS has shown that it wants to avoid repeating the mistakes that its predecessors made in Iraq. It has carefully chosen its targets and made sure that the most extreme elements within the movement do not cast Muslim civilians as apostates and thereby try to legitimize killing them. It has also carried out a soft-power campaign to win the hearts and minds of locals, including children.

So long as ISIS keeps up this approach, it is unlikely to be pushed aside in the near term. The group is now a key actor on the ground, and the future success of its jihadist project is in its hands. That said, ISIS will likely alienate many locals and face growing opposition in the long term, as will be discussed in Part II.

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