

The Growing Shadow of ISIS

by Ilana Freedman and Jerry Gordon (July 2014)



As the chaos in the Middle East continues to churn towards regional meltdown, the complexity of the situation seems to have the West at a total loss. Nations once known as world leaders, most notably the United States, appear unable to even understand the cast of players. No viable policy that could effectively counteract the forces at play has emerged. Into that vacuum has rushed a flood of Islamist terrorist groups, fighting each other as well as the offending governments they have chosen to attack. It happened in Libya, then in Syria, in the Sinai, and most recently in Iraq.

The confrontations developing in the Middle East are the predictable outcome of the so-called “Arab Spring,” coupled with weak American leadership which has empowered Islamists throughout the world to challenge the West at every opportunity. They know that the West will not respond.

The “Arab Spring” began in Tunisia in 2010, and raced through Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, and other countries with large or predominantly Muslim populations whether Arab or not. The movement was later renamed the “Arab Awakening,” but changing the name didn’t change its Sunni Islamic character.

The common thread throughout these rolling revolutions that cut such a broad swath of the Muslim world was the dramatic shift from largely secular autocracies to Islamist-dominated governments. Uprisings that began naïvely as movements to promote democratic government, devolved into bloody and chaotic wars, spanning the region from West Africa to Malaysia. In many cases they installed new Islamist leaders governing under strict Shari’ah law.

Deeply imbedded and often covert in these conflicts is Shi’ah Iran and its proxies such as Hezbollah, hell-bent to generate chaos; presumably the chaos Shi’ah Muslims believe will precede the coming of the 12th Imam. On the other side are scores of Sunni groups, fighting the Shi’ah in Iraq, Assad in Syria, and each other wherever they can.

One of the most notorious of these is ISIS, the Islamic State of al-Sham (Syria) also known as ISIL (Islamic State of the Levant). Its reputation for fearlessness, brutal savagery, and radical Islamist ideology has created a serious new threat to the West.

Background

ISIS evolved from a group founded by [Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#) in 2004. He gave the group the improbably long name of “The Organization of Jihad’s Base in the Country of Two Rivers.” In 2006, the name was changed to the simpler “Islamic State of Iraq” (ISI). Then, in 2012, after entering the conflict in Syria to challenge both the forces of the ruling Assad and the various opposition groups, secular and Islamist, ISI was changed to ISIS. Thus including Syria and reflecting its expanded goals, ISIS moved further away from the core al Qaeda agenda that did not embrace the Caliphate as a primary goal.

While the group’s original aim was to establish an Islamic caliphate in the regions of Iraq where there is a Sunni-majority, once the group became involved in the Syrian war, this mission was expanded to include controlling the Sunni-majority areas in northern Syria. In the course of ISIS’ expansion and successes in Syria, they opened a second front in Iraq. ISIS smashed through city after city and took a huge swath of the country from the north to central Iraq in the largely Sunni areas. The goal was expanded to attacks on the Syrian border to blur the boundaries between Iraq and Syria that could facilitate a merger into a single Islamist state.

On June 29, 2014, ISIS took a major step to achieve its goals. It [formally announced](#) the establishment of the Caliphate, naming Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the “Caliph for all Muslims.” In a recorded message distributed online, ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani said, “The Shura [council] of the Islamic State met and discussed [the caliphate] The Islamic State decided to establish an Islamic caliphate and to designate a caliph for the state of the Muslims The jihadist cleric Baghdadi was designated the caliph of the Muslims. . . . The leader of Muslims everywhere.”

Little is known about the shadowy figure of al-Baghdadi, also known as Abu Du’a. His name is a *nom de guerre*, and his real name is unknown. According to the US State Department, Baghdadi was born in Samarra, Iraq in 1971. He took over command of ISIS in 2010 after two of its commanders were killed in a US-Iraqi raid. In 2011, the US Treasury designated him a terrorist. Within ISIS, he is known as a battlefield commander and tactician, however his current whereabouts, like his history, is a matter for speculation. The US believes he is living in Syria, but others are certain he is in Iraq.

With the announcement came the news that the [name of the organization](#) was changed once again, this time to “The Islamic State.” The organization [has called on al-Qa’eda](#) and other jihadist Sunni factions to pledge their allegiance to the new Caliphate.

This is a stunning turn of events. In fact, its importance cannot be overstated. This one event has the power to galvanize the Sunni Muslim world in a way that has never happened before. However, it also has the power to enrage some of the Sunni jihadist groups, like al Qaeda, who are not likely to accept a role subservient to ISIS. Even worse, Shi'ah nations like Iran would never agree to show fealty to a Sunni caliphate. Their respective responses could well start a new round of conflicts and internecine terrorism unlike anything we have ever seen. Much depends on how responsible the leaders of the Muslim world will be in keeping the conflict of ideologies from exploding into war. If history is any gauge, there is little room for optimism.

ISIS has been infamous for the vicious brutality that has characterized its operations, and has left a trail of bloody horror behind it in Iraq and Syria, including crucifixions, mass murders, and dismemberment. It would be unrealistic to expect them to care much about the welfare of the Muslim masses should conflict break out as a result of their announcement. Whatever happens next, it is not likely to be business as usual.

ISIS Funding

One of the most stunning changes for ISIS over the last year has been its rapid accumulation of wealth. Just as the group has surged in strength and prominence in Iraq and Syria in recent months, it has unquestionably become the wealthiest terrorist organization in the world, with an estimated worth of \$5-7 billion. This wealth was acquired in several ways.

Among the most notable and colorful was the sacking of the Central Bank in Mosul in early June 2014. When Iraqi soldiers fled the bank they were supposed to protect, they left it wide open for ISIS. The terrorists seized \$429 million, much of it in gold bullion. According to a [CFR report](#), it is believed that supporters in Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia have provided "the bulk of past funding."

Another key source of ongoing revenues for ISIS, however, has been extortion from the populations wherever it takes control. Even before moving into a town or city, it demands "taxes" from local businesses. In this fashion, it is estimated that they have been able to net more than \$8 million a month.

For the residents, the choice of whether or not to pay the "taxes" is simple. Failure to comply with these extortion efforts, or failure to pay on time, can result in penalties that include murder, kidnapping, and the destruction of their property. ISIS' reputation for unspeakable brutality keeps their victims in line. All commercial activities in the areas controlled by ISIS are without exception, subject to ISIS' extortion demands.

Other forms of revenue generation include drug trafficking, smuggling, theft, and looting.

Living Under ISIS Control

The harshest forms of Shari'ah law are imposed on those living under ISIS control. They include mandatory prayer in a mosque five times a day and required female "modesty" for all women, which means that every woman is forced to wear the full, body-covering *chador*.

In return, ISIS provides the population with social services, including health and welfare programs, bread factories, and food distributions to needy families. Unlike the Taliban, ISIS participates in polio-vaccination campaigns for local children. They have also established a number of religious schools for children, including schools for girls, and live-in "training camps" for "cub scouts." Another part of ISIS' governance is to provide for infrastructure construction and repairs.

ISIS has established a Consumer Protection Authority that has forced shops, supermarkets, and even kebab stands to close for selling poor quality products. They have [burned cartons of cigarettes](#) (considered Haram or forbidden in radical Islam), and desecrated graves and shrines they consider blasphemous. That includes the famous Uways al-Qurani shrine in Raqqa, which they blew up in a [massive explosion](#).

In contradiction to their program of social services, the ISIS form of jurisprudence is extreme and harsh. ISIS has whipped people for minor infractions such as insulting a neighbor, cut off the hands of those caught stealing, and summarily executed and [crucified](#) individuals for [apostasy](#).

New Sources of Power

In recent weeks, ISIS has demonstrated an alarming show of power in Iraq, taking much of the world by surprise, and expanding its power in a number of ways.

Strategic partnering. The first has been through strategic alliances to achieve the conquest of Iraq and Syria. In the latest surge southward in Iraq, ISIS forged alliances with 41 different groups as they moved their forces south towards Baghdad.

In addition to alliances with smaller groups like the Islamic Army, a Sunni rebel faction, ISIS teamed up with the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order. This group was created in 2007 by former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath party. Led by [Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri](#), Saddam's former deputy, the Naqshbandi still enjoy considerable prestige in Iraq. They are thought to have thousands of soldiers, including many who were members of the Iraqi army

before the U.S. invasion. Although their leaders seem to have a great deal of influence over ISIS, the relationship is more expedient than ideological. It is not likely to last, particularly given the announcement of the Caliphate and all of the religious connotations that accompany it.

In April 2013, Baghdadi [declared a merger](#) between ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate fighting in Syria. He said that al-Nusra was “merely an extension and part of the Islamic State of Iraq.” But Ayman al Zawahiri, the leader of al Qaeda, annulled the merger, ostensibly to end the increased tensions and infighting between the two groups. In a [letter](#) addressed to both leaders, he ordered ISI to limit its operations to Iraq. But Baghdadi responded by producing a video in which he announced the creation of ISIS, ushering in the beginning of new growth and power for the organization.

In addition to the alliances it has made, ISIS has also recruited thousands of fighters from the Arab world, Europe and North America, to join the fight in Syria and Iraq.

Applying Its Wealth. Over the last year, ISIS has significantly expanded its clout through the acquisition of massive wealth, and the judicious use of its treasury – using its multi-billion dollar exchequer as a very powerful weapon. With it, ISIS has acquired resources, weapons, and influence. Combined with their ruthlessness, they have been able to command most of the areas they have set out to conquer, acquiring dominance over northern Syria and much of northern Iraq.

Acquisition of Lethal Weaponry. Prior to 2014, ISIS suffered from a severe shortage of weapons as they faced the US-equipped Iraqi military forces. Once they launched their assault on Fallujah in January, however, the situation changed dramatically. Iraqi soldiers fled before them, leaving their weapons behind and their armories unsecured. As ISIS overran police stations and security posts, they helped themselves to stores of US weaponry and vehicles, including Humvees, which had been left behind by departing US troops. The Humvees have been seen driving around in places as far away as Aleppo, Syria, 250 miles away, filled with well-armed ISIS fighters.

Although there is no official accounting of how many weapons ISIS has acquired during the last six months, the numbers seem to be huge. Ahmad Dabaash, spokesman for the Islamic Army [quipped](#), “Praise God, we soon had enough weapons to fight for one or two years!”

In an alarming turn of events, it was [reported](#) on June 19 that ISIS had overrun the Saddam Hussein-era al-Muthanna chemical weapons complex 60 miles north of Baghdad. This coup gave them access to hundreds of tons of potentially deadly poisons, including mustard and sarin

gas.

ISIS has shown itself to be technologically competent, as well as brutal and ruthless. The possession of so much lethal material in their hands portends dire situations for those they consider dispensable.

Proliferation. ISIS' forays into Syria, laid the groundwork for rapid growth. Their particular style of conquest through rape, torture, and murder have made them feared and hated. That has enabled them to gain strength through fear, to build their war chest, and to set their sights on Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and beyond.

Most recently, they have appeared unexpectedly in Gaza. On June 29, 2014 mourners at a funeral in Gaza were observed carrying the black and white flags of ISIS for one of the two terrorists, whose body was also draped in an ISIS flag. The two terrorists had been targeted in an Israeli airstrike for firing rockets from Gaza into populated areas of Israel. It was the first time that public signs of support for ISIS have been seen in Gaza, which is strictly controlled by Hamas, another Sunni Islamist terrorist group. Because it is customary for the body of a "martyr" to be buried in the flag of his organization, the fact that the terrorist's body was wrapped in the ISIS flag would suggest a more than casual affiliation with the group.

In addition, the Egyptian Army claims that 15 ISIS operatives infiltrated the Sinai over the weekend of June 28th, but were captured, and that other ISIS fighters have been entering the Sinai from Gaza via tunnels. Hamas has flatly denied these allegations because it demonstrates their lack of control in the areas they are supposed to govern. However, the infiltration of Sinai, a terrorist playground, would be consistent with ISIS' aim to expand its domain as far as possible. It also puts it in firing distance from every Islamist's arch enemy, Israel.

Determined to destroy the national boundaries created in the Arab world following the [1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement](#), which established British and French spheres of influence in the Middle East after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in WWI, ISIS has begun to institute the part of its plan that will blur the borders between Iraq and its neighbors, in order to re-establish an Islamic Caliphate to rule over a united Sunni territorial base.

In a bold move to achieve that goal, ISIS has not only attacked and captured several border crossings between Iraq and Syria, it has also attacked the only border crossing between Iraq and Jordan, another target of ISIS in its program to consolidate the entire Sunni Muslim region into a single Caliphate.

The continued activity of ISIS as it moves towards its goals, and the continued silence of the

West, does not bode well for the region or the world. A video allegedly shot by ISIS terrorists at a captured Iraqi border post on the Syrian border shows captured Iraqi soldiers and vehicles, while an English-speaking fighter reaffirms the declaration of an Islamic Caliphate. (Watch the video [here](#))

“This is not the first border we will break,” he says. “God will break all barriers....Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon...all of them until we reach Quds (Jerusalem). This is the first of many barriers we will break.”

ISIS on Israel's Doorstep

ISIS is more than just a political threat in the sectarian turmoil of the Middle East. That was recognized in [comments](#) by New York Rep. Peter King on *ABC's This Week* that President Obama should be “very very aggressive” about ISIS. He was most immediately concerned about protecting our Embassy in Baghdad with 800 US security troops. There are also 300 US military advisors engaged in assessing what to do to bolster a divided Shiite-dominated military and government in Iraq. The al-Maliki government is now being supported by drones which are gathering intelligence and air strikes from Iran's Quds Force.

King was also concerned about the estimated 100 American jihadis reported to be fighting with ISIS. ISIS has enticed them with [English language weekly and annual reports and videos](#). My co-host, Lisa Benson, on the weekly [Lisa Benson Show](#) program, commented off-line about the plethora of such sophisticated ISIS social media that is published daily. That brought back memories of the successful 2008 campaign to get Google to shut down al Qaeda jihadist training websites.

The Administration for its part looks like the proverbial deer frozen in the headlights of ISIS. Last week, it floated the belated idea of funding \$500 million to train “moderate” Sunni rebel fighters in the Syrian civil war. This is a civil war that looks increasingly like a stalemate between ISIS and the Assad forces, backed by Hezbollah and Iran's Quds Force with support from Putin's Russia.

That Administration proposal may be more than a day late and a dollar short. Given that such aid would not even begin until 2015, should Congress approve it, it may be totally beside the point. We had [reports](#) in mid-June from *Der Spiegel* and other sources that the some CIA-trained rebel fighters in Jordan opted to join ISIS, given its stunning successes. We are likely to find that this is more the rule than the exception, as those we have trained opt for the success of ISIS' terrorist activity.

As Dan Diker, Research Fellow at the International Institute for Counter Terrorism in Israel, pointed out on the June 29, 2014 [Lisa Benson Show](#), according to a *Times of Israel* [report](#), anti-Assad Sunni rebels may control 95 percent of the Syrian Golan Heights which now is peppered with groups of fighters from various groups, including the Free Syrian Army, the Islamist Ahrar el Sham, the al Qaeda-linked al Nusrah, and in the town of Daraa, a contingent of ISIS, which is generally collaborating with al Nusrah, at least in this area.

Mudar Zahran on the same program noted that the Islamic Action Front (IAF), Jordan's main Islamist political party and the political arm of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, which is largely Bedouin, is the strongest organized Islamist group in Jordan, and the only one represented in Jordan's parliament. He drew attention to the daily pitched battles in the southern town of Ma'an between Jordanian security forces and local tribal supporters of the IAF flying ISIS flags. Ma'an is located less than three kilometers from Israel's frontier. The headline in a *Washington Post* [report](#) on the turmoil in Ma'an read, "Jordan fears homegrown ISIS more than invasion from Iraq."

The security of Jordan as a buffer state, as Diker pointed out, is foremost on the agenda of Israel's national security. We note the [comments](#) in *The Times of Israel* by former Israeli security cabinet strategic advisor Gen. Yaakov Amidror, who said that Israel should bolster the defense of Jordan against the ISIS onslaught. At the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS) of Tel Aviv University, on June 29, 2014, Israeli PM Netanyahu [underlined](#) these security issues. He talked about support for an Independent Kurdistan and completing a security fence along Israel's eastern frontier from the Golan to Eilat. Netanyahu said:

The forces of fanatical Islam are already knocking on our door and Israel needs to be proactive to bolster its defense against enemy infiltration.

The first thing that we need to do is to build a security fence on our eastern border, and to build it gradually all the way from Eilat to merge with the security fence that we've been building over the last two years in the Golan Heights," he said. "That fence does not hermetically prevent infiltration; it doesn't prevent shooting through the fence as we saw tragically [just a week ago](#)