

From al-Qaeda in Iraq to Islamic State: The Story of Insurgency in Iraq and Syria in 2003-2015

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Abstract: *Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) currently controls vast territories in Iraq and Syria with estimated population up to 5 million people. In June 2014, ISIS made a move to conquer Sunni areas of Iraq in provinces like Ninawa, Salah ad-Din, and al-Anbar. Until May 2015, there had been no significant military success combating ISIS. This paper argues that renewed Sunni insurgency in Iraq was indeed brewing for several years. ISIS campaign is described within the framework of the concept of insurgency. The text provides a comprehensive narrative of ISIS' and its organizational predecessors' insurgency in Iraq and Syria in the period of 2003-2015. As a conceptual background it utilizes a lifespan of insurgencies that argues that each insurgency must pass from proto-insurgency to large scale insurgency phase, and finally to a "conventional stage" when insurgency is strong enough to meet counterinsurgent in open battlefield. A lifespan of ISIS insurgency indeed reached tipping point and entered "conventional stage" in June 2014 when it assumed control over key Sunni areas of Iraq.*

Keywords: Abu Bakr al-Bahdadi, Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi, al-Qaeda in Iraq, AQI, insurgency, Islamic State, IS, ISIS, Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham

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1. Introduction

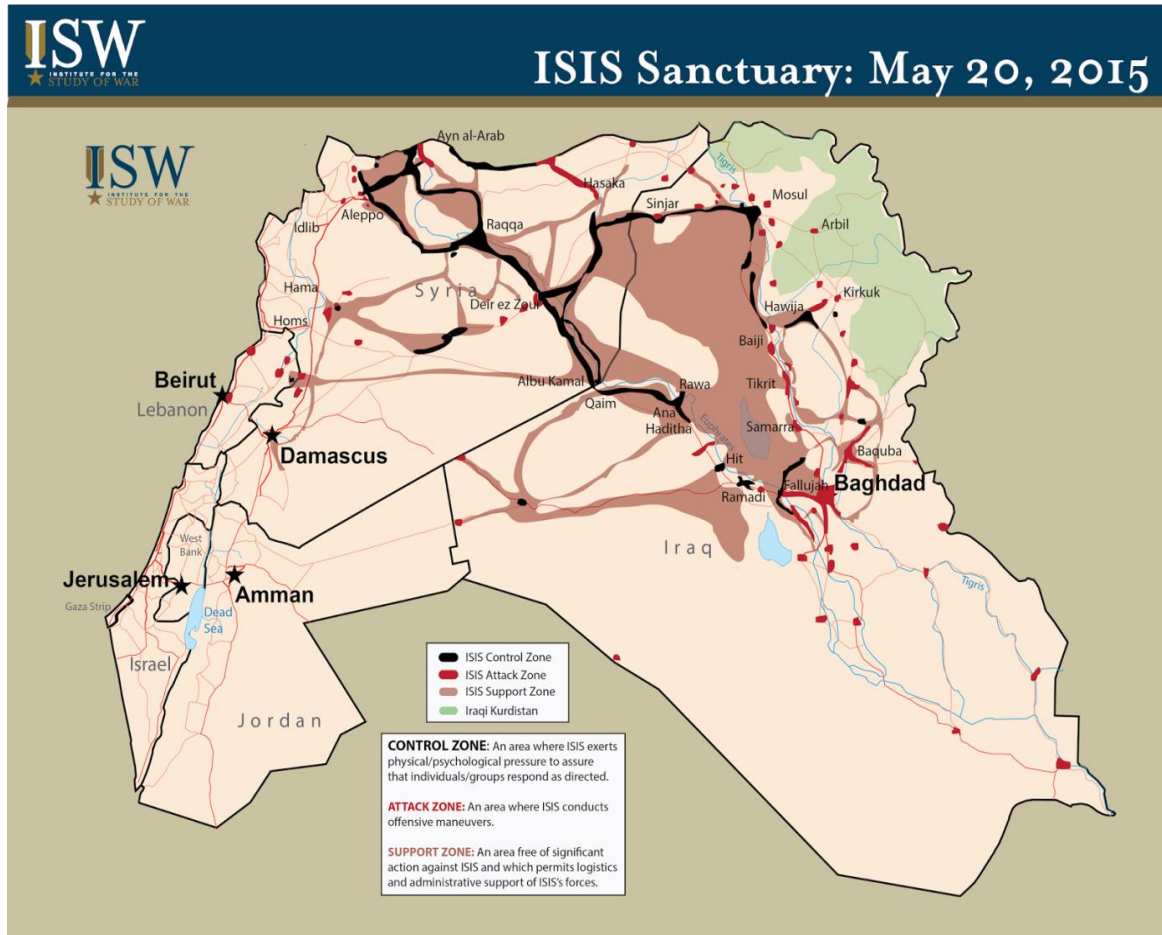
While for many such resurgence of Sunni insurgency in Iraq that Allies experienced especially in 2004-2007 may come as a surprise, it had been brewing since the US pullout in 2011 in the Sunni-controlled areas of Iraq. Later incarnations of a feared organization of Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi, commonly known as "al-Qaeda in Iraq" (AQI), ramped up its visible presence in province like al-Anbar, Ninawa, Diyala, Salah ad-Din and even control over certain towns, for example since 2012 in the town of as-Sa'diyah northeast of Baghdad in Diyala province.¹ AQI-dominated coalition of Salafist groups subsequently adopted in October 2006 a name "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI).² After months of careful within-Syria preparations, ISI openly declared expansion to war-torn Syria in April 2013 and change name to "Islamic State of Iraq and Sham".³ In January 2014, Baghdad effectively lost control over strategic areas of al-Anbar province.⁴

In the beginning of June 2014, ISIS units started a coordinated large-scale military operation in northwestern Iraq and quickly swept through cities like Mosul, Samarra, Fallujah, or Tikrit, and threatened to march on Baghdad. Iraqi security forces (ISF) literally fell apart and fled in panic in direction to Baghdad in tens of thousands leaving most of the weaponry behind facing reportedly just hundreds of ISIS militants.⁵ Advancing ISIS units counting ten thousand at best were in many places welcomed by the Sunni population as saviours from Rawafidh (derogative term used for Shi'ites by Salafists).⁶ On June 19, 2014, the official spokesperson of ISIS Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, heralded a new era of international jihad. ISIS declared its own caliphate: *"O soldiers of the Islamic State, Allah, ordered us with jihad and promised us with victory but He did not make us responsible for victory. Indeed, Allah blessed you today with this victory thus announced the Caliphate in compliance with the order of Allah."*⁷

Currently, ISIS controls vast territories of Iraq and Syria with a total population up to 5 million people (see Map No. 1). Despite numerous efforts, there has not been a single significant military success (except for a tactical victory when breaking the siege of a town of Kobani on Syrian-Turkish border in January 2015).⁸ ISF, supported by Shia militias, Kurdish Peshmergas, Iranian forces, and the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition (officially named Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve⁹), were not able to conduct a long proclaimed "spring offensive of 2015" to retake Mosul.¹⁰ The offensive apparently stopped in Tikrit, when it also once again proved inability to earn trust of the Sunni population and restrain from the misconduct of Sunni civilians.¹¹ In May 2015, ISIS still remains widely uncountered: Ramadi fell in the hands of ISIS¹², as well as a strategic town of Palmyra¹³ in Syria.

Presented paper examines ISIS in Iraq and Syria through the lenses of the concept of insurgency in the period 2003-2015.¹⁴ It gives account of key events within Sunni Islamist insurgency in Iraq and spread of ISIS to Syria in early 2013. I describe main events on the basis of RAND Corporation's model of evolution (or lifespan) of insurgencies from proto-insurgency, through small scale and large scale insurgency up to a final turning point when insurgents are so powerful that they dare to challenge counterinsurgent in an open conventional warfare. In ISIS' case in Iraq the final phase lasted since June 2014.¹⁵

The main goal of the paper is to shed light on the origins of ISIS insurgency in order to illustrate the group's lifespan, ability to adapt its organization and strategy, and deep-seated discontents (Sunni grievances) it uses to mobilize supporters. I argue that strong and persisting presence of prerequisites (such as grievances, weak and illegitimate governments, or available resources for insurgents to levy, unfulfilled promises about co-optation of Sunnis into the Iraqi state structures)¹⁶ "brewed" renewed Sunni insurgency for several years, which was further strengthened by establishing foothold in Syria in 2013. Therefore, another war in Iraq should not have caught us as a surprise.¹⁷



Map No. 1: ISIS Control of Territory in Iraq and Syria, May 2015.¹⁸

2. Creating Framework for Analysis of ISIS Insurgency

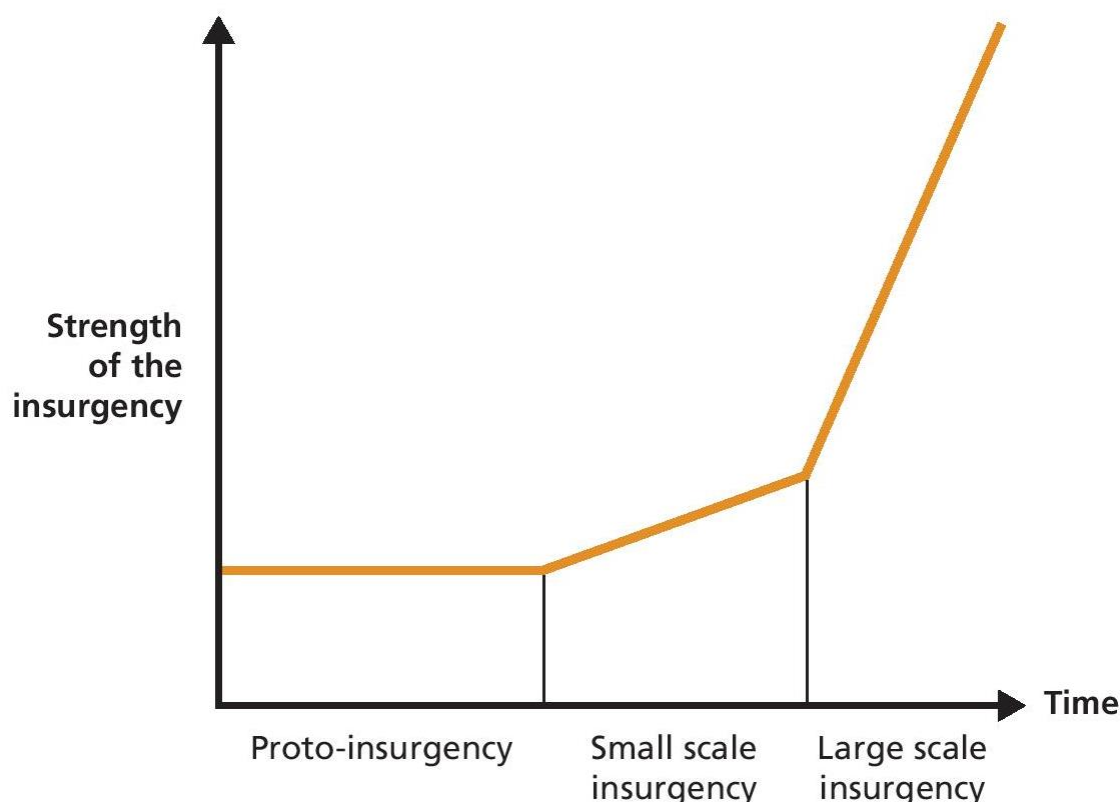
2.1 An Organization that Calls Itself a State but is an Insurgent Group

ISIS's propaganda efforts both within controlled areas and outside devoted considerable energy to maintain a perception that it is indeed a "state" able to fulfill state-like services for its population and effectively govern, especially on local level.¹⁹ Such a paradigm is wrong (obviously) both morally and analytically. ISIS is simply an insurgency, albeit a successful one. And all successful insurgencies in the history that managed to control territory had to govern population under its rule and try to "keep basic services running" just as it was under counterinsurgent's rule. Otherwise, the population would hardly comply with insurgents.²⁰ As Kalyvas argues, pure violence of insurgents against civilians is an inefficient tool to control population.²¹

As a result of the Western experience with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been a renewed surge of literature about the concepts of insurgency and counterinsurgency (reflected for example in series of studies by RAND Corporation, works of David Kilcullen, T. X. Hammes, discussions in *The Small War Journal* and *The Long War Journal*). Broadly, the concept of insurgency can be defined with David Kilcullen as "(...) a popular movement that seeks to overthrow the status quo through subversion, political activity, insurrection, armed conflict and terrorism."²² Kilcullen's definition clearly shows a wide spectrum of activities that insurgents usually do: from non-violent ones, such as (illegal) political activity, subversion, to armed conflict and terrorism. Most insurgencies combine several tools together with respect to their power or contextual position in pursue for their ultimate strategic goal. They do so "(...) step by step, in order to attain specific intermediate objectives leading finally to the overthrow of the existing order."²³ For example, although ISIS was able to conduct numerous terrorist attacks in Iraq in 2011-2013, it was not strong enough to wage a truly large-scale conventional armed conflict against Baghdad until June 2014.

2. 2 Lifespan of Insurgency

I draw a narrative of main events in the insurgency of ISIS and its organization predecessors in Iraq and Syria in the period of 2003-2015. A model of lifespan of insurgencies provided by RAND Corporation (see Scheme No. 2. 2: Lifespan of Insurgencies) serves as a ground for analysis. RAND identifies three phases of insurgency:²⁴ proto-insurgency, small scale insurgency, and large scale insurgency.



Scheme No. 2. 2: Lifespan of Insurgencies.²⁵

In **the proto-insurgency phase** “(...) the movement is small and weak. It is normally composed of a small cadre of “true believers” who are strongly committed to dramatic change in the political-economic status quo of a nation or region. (...) their potential to „make trouble“ are limited. (...) the main concern of the insurgents is to survive. Indeed, most insurgencies collapse at this stage (...).”²⁶ Proto insurgency is „(...) a small, violent group that seeks to gain the size necessary to more effectively achieve its goals and use tools such as political mobilization and guerrilla warfare as well as terrorism.”²⁷

As Byman’s study²⁸ suggests, proto-insurgencies require a suitable environment in order to create its identity, exploiting cause, a safe haven, and sustain security forces’ attempts to erase it. In case of Iraq, it was indeed increasing weakness of the state, poor governance, and persisting existence of a root cause which was Sunni’s marginalization in the hands of al-Maliki’s Baghdad.²⁹ In Syria, an emerging civil war allowed actors to exploit existing sectarian divides (albeit they were arguably not as strong as in Iraq carrying Saddam’s legacy).³⁰ If the government’s provisions are seen as sufficient and if the regime is perceived as “fair and legitimate” in the eyes of population, it is hard for insurgents to win their popular support, even though they manage to find a sounding root cause.

Such conditions provide considerable opportunity which gives insurgents a chance to exploit grievances more freely and link it to its cause and actions. A motive, or a sounding

“cause”, which is “(...) a broad perception of injustice linked to to the government that insurgents use to mobilize a population.”³¹ A root cause might be based on identity (religious, ethnic), religion (a belief that religion should drive politics), corruption, inequality, general sense of injustice etc. David Galula also asserts that it must be a “deep-seated” and not easily espoused by the counterinsurgent.³² Insurgents exploit existing grievance and create a narrative that “(...) is used to link condition-based grievances to the nature of behaviour of the incumbent regime and articulate an alternative political vision that will adress those grivances.”³³

A **small scale insurgency** is a phase when the group is able to conduct limited attacks both terrorist ones and guerilla ones, in other words, „(...) insurgents will have gained sufficient numbers to start to make their presence felt. Rallies led by insurgent leaders, open postings in public and on electronic media of calls to overthrow the corrupt government, (...).“³⁴

In the third stage, **large scale insurgency**, “(...) insurgents by now have gained considerable support within the local population. Their numbers may be in many thousand. (...) They will have probably established physical control over various parts of the country and will likely be in position to contest government control in other areas.”³⁵ Byman notes that at this point, insurgency has a very good chance to prevail.³⁶

I also add the fourth phase to RAND’s framework, which is in Galula’s sense³⁷ a final stage of every insurgency, a “**conventional stage**” – the point when it is powerful enough to challenge counterinsurgent in conventional warfare. Ingram points out that “(...) a transition to conventional military operations and strategies is almost inevitable as military equilibrium is gradually reached between the insurgent and counterinsurgent forces.”³⁸

3. A Rocky Path to Caliphate: An Overview of a Lifespan of ISIS Insurgency in 2003-2015

az-Zarqawi’s organization, called al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (TWJ) in the past, indeed passed a **proto-insurgency stage** very quickly. It had already been established in Suleymaniyah in northern Iraq with a small group of warriors trained in al-Qaeda’s camp in Herat, Afghanistan when the US invasion started in March 2003. TWJ had already established its sleeper cells especially in Baghdad, which was bout to become its primal theatre of operation.

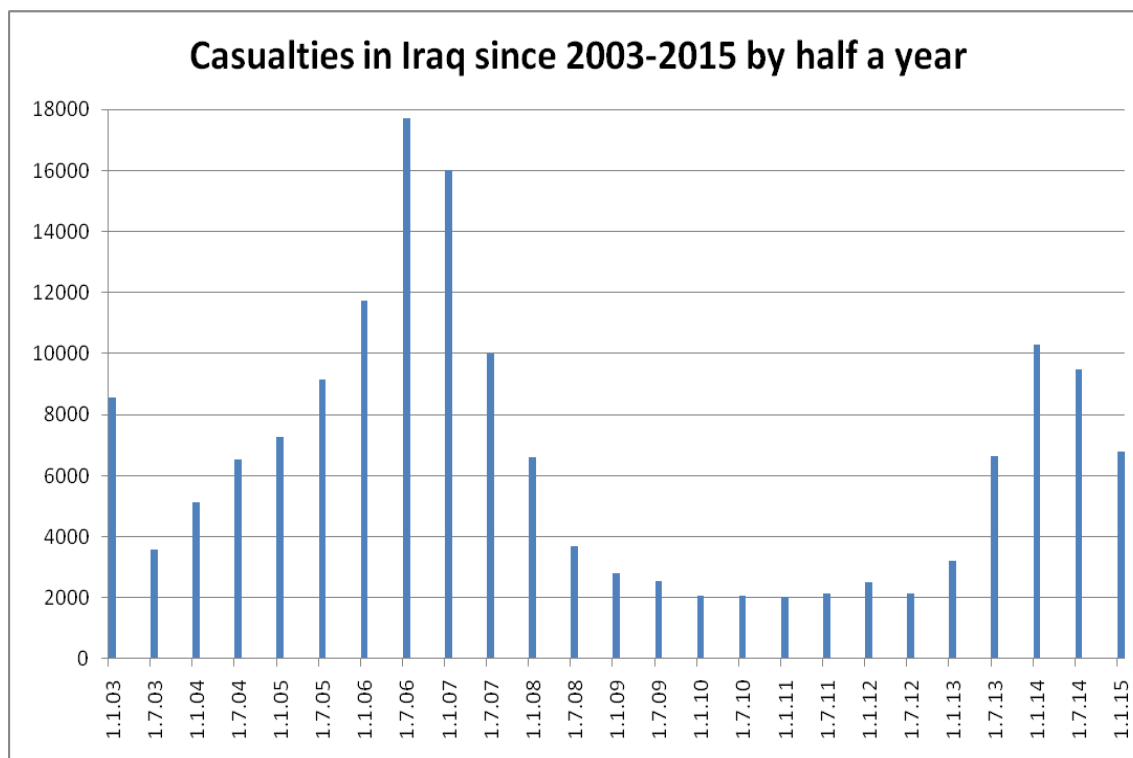
TWJ’s insurgency transformed quickly into **small scale insurgency** with a tipping point marked by major car bombings in Baghdad in August 2003 (it targeted Shi’ite mosque in Najaf, UN Mission headquarters, and Jordanian embassy in Baghdad). TWJ indeed made their operational presence felt, and although it was only one of the actors of gradually brewing Sunni insurgency, it had a very favorable starting point with already established covert networks, sleeper cells and experienced fighters often with experience from in Afghan wars. ISIS had skillfully exploited Sunni grievances and positioned itself as a saviour of Sunni population against Shi’ites (which AQI and its successors actually fueled itself by promoting sectarian violence when targeting Shi’ite civilians as a part of their tactics of provocation).

Another tipping point that heralded transformation to **large scale insurgency** was September 2004, when az-Zarqawi officially pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and the organization became known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Official al-Qaeda sanctioning made AQI the main platform for flocking foreign fighters, and as well for home-grown radical Islamists. AQI experienced stable growth in emerging chaos in Iraq. It was staging major terrorist attacks. al-Shishani estimates³⁹ that in the first two years of the US occupation (up to April 2005), only 14 % of insurgent’s attacks can be attributed to az-Zarqawi’s group (it is worth noting that in almost 50 % of cases the group used suicide bombings often in cars). Despite its relatively small role, it was attracting an incredible amount of media attention and AQI was “hunted down” by occupation forces, which made it desirable for recruits, and forged a perception that AQI is a major actor of Sunni insurgency. By 2006, AQI was even able to control some neighborhoods in Baghdad, areas in al-Anbar province. It sustained despite az-Zarqawi’s death in the summer of 2006. In 2007, Islamic State of Iraq (it renamed itself after az-Zarqawi’s death) took a defensive stance after the US troops surge and Sahwa (Sunni tribal militias fighting insurgents) were introduced.

Sahwa and surge indeed had success as it is seen on graphs of casualties below and by early 2009, ISI was severely damaged and the security situation in Iraq bettered considerably. In 2009-2011 ISI's insurgency turned **again into a small scale phase**, since it reduced conducted attacks, lost control over territory and was in general in hiding (and stripped of a large portion of their cadres either due to targeted killings, or sentences to imprisonment). At this dormant stage, ISI also moved to Mosul and focused rather on criminal activities, establishing sources of income. ISI developed considerable pool of resources due to their extensive criminal enterprises. *"A group that already has resourcing could potentially become an insurgency."*⁴⁰ In other words, if the group has already established system for generating income (for example by running successful criminal enterprises), it has better position to start (or renew) insurgency.

At this point, ISIS was not able to fully control large spans of territory. After the complete US pullout in 2011, Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (name adopted in April 2013) insurgency again started to gradually ramp up its intensity into very **intensive large scale insurgency** until the first half of 2013 in Syria and June 2014 in Iraq. A surge of civilian and ISF deaths is also clearly seen in 2013 in casualties statistics presented below. With the US pullout in 2011, an opportunity to expand the operation to war-torn Syria, and in a wider sense al-Maliki's sectarian governance, it managed to resurface once again. In 2012, ISI was staging prison breaks to free their cadres in "Breaking the Walls Campaign", in 2013 it was able to mount up attacks against ISF in "Soldier Harvest Campaign". By 2014, ISIS had a firm and visible presence in al-Anbar, Salah ad-Din, Ninawa, Diyala and outskirts of Baghdad. In January 2014 ISF defence broke down as ISIS took parts of al-Anbar.

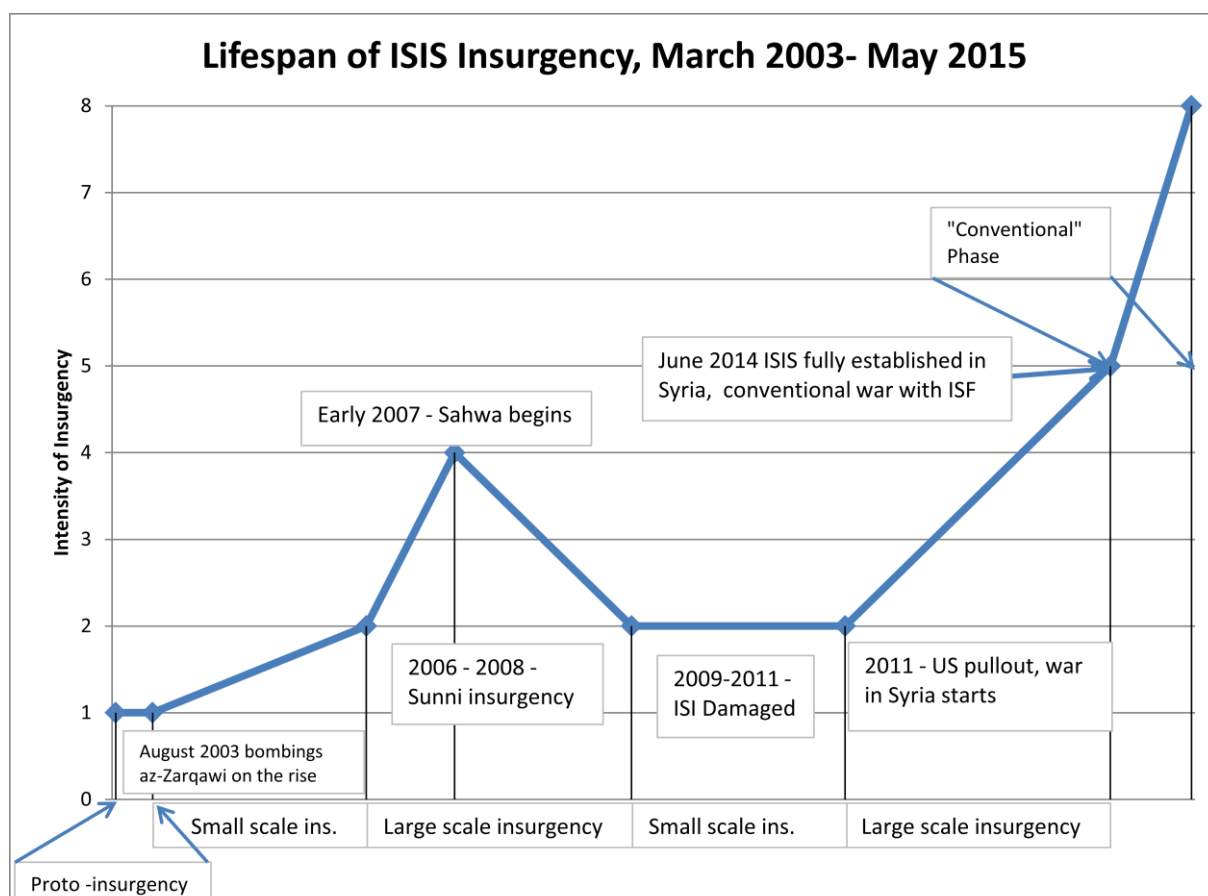
In June 2014, ISIS insurgency was able to successfully challenge counterinsurgents in conventional warfare and continued to do so by capturing the key Iraqi city of Ramadi in May 2015. Reaching the fourth, **"conventional" stage**, is marked by a tipping point when insurgent is able to successfully conduct conventional warfare against counterinsurgent. In ISIS case, the declaration of Caliphate in June 2014 may be regarded as the beginning of the fourth stage.



Graph No. 3: Casualties in Iraq since 2003-2015 by half a year (civilian deaths).⁴¹

Year	Iraqi Security Forces Casualties
June 2003-2004	1300
2005	2545
2006	2091
2007	1830
2008	1070
2009	515
2010	468
2011	702
2012	818
2013	2241 (until December)
2014	est. 4000-31000 combatants (included insurgents)

Table No. 3: Iraqi Security Forces Casualties 2003-2014.⁴²

Scheme No. 3: Lifespan of ISIS Insurgency, 2003-2015.⁴³

4. Until October 2004: az-Zarqawi's Quick Start in Iraq and Bay'at to al-Qaeda

4.1 A Path to Establishment of at-Tawhid wa al-Jihad in Iraq

The founding father of the organization commonly known since 2004 as „al-Qaeda in Iraq“ was Jordanian national Ahmad Fadhil Nazzal al-Khalayah, better known under his *nom de guerre* Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi. By 2005, az-Zarqawi acquired status of a legend of Iraqi Islamist insurgency⁴⁴ and he is up to this day praised as a hero by ISIS. After all, in every issue of ISIS' magazine *Dabiq*, his remarks are included and it starts with his quote: *“The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dābiq.”*⁴⁵

az-Zarqawi, a high school dropout, and a frequent participant of drunken brawls at that time, found his way to Afghanistan in 1989 after attending courses in *madrassa* in Jordan.⁴⁶ He acquired useful contacts there and returned to Jordan in 1992. Then, he joined a terrorist cell along with his spiritual mentor he met in Afghanistan, a still influential radical cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi⁴⁷ (now a loud critic of ISIS⁴⁸). According to McCants and Brachman⁴⁹, al-Maqdisi's texts were highly influential and were dominating the list of most read jihadist texts in the key *Tawhed.ws* website.

Both az-Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi were arrested in March 1994 by Jordanian intelligence. Weaver asserts that imprisonment was az-Zarqawi's “university”, where he became more focused, brutal, and decisive.⁵⁰ After his release in 1999, he traveled back to Afghanistan and found himself in charge of a small start-up training camp in Herat funded by al-Qaeda.⁵¹ His group known as “at-Tawhid wa al-Jihad” consisting of some 300 militants retreated to Iran in December 2001 amid invasion to Afghanistan and later relocated to Baghdad and then northern Iraq in Kurdish Sulaymaniyah province.⁵²

Shortly after the US-led invasion in March 2003, az-Zarqawi's TWJ staged several high-profile terrorist attacks in Baghdad. These events highlighted TWJ's strategy and az-Zarqawi's priorities. On August 7, a car bomb detonated at the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad killing 17 people.⁵³ On August 19, UN Assistance Mission HQ was attacked with a suicide car bomb resulting in 22 deaths.⁵⁴ Finally, on August 29, TWJ bombed symbolic Shi'ite Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf which left 95 people dead.⁵⁵ Another bitter „new strategy“ introduced by az-Zarqawi's group was beheading of Westerners and then publishing videos from executions (an element of propaganda strategy that ISIS still employs). The first Westerner beheaded was on May 7, 2004, 26-year old Nick Berg, a civilian mechanic working as a contractor in Iraq.⁵⁶

az-Zarqawi kept deep grievances towards “apostate” Jordania, and he wanted to fight the occupation powers. But most importantly (and this has remained a major component of ISIS' strategy up to today), he considered Shi'ites the mortal enemies to Sunnis. On February 2004, az-Zarqawi's letter to bin Ladin was intercepted and it described Shi'ites as “*the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom.*”⁵⁷ It also cited famous ibn Taymiyya's account of Shi'ites: “*They are the enemy. Beware of them. Fight them. By God, they lie.*”⁵⁸ TWJ's and its successors' strategy has always focused on killing Shi'ite civilians in various terrorist attacks, ethnic cleansing campaigns etc., not only for obvious ideological reason but as a classic insurgent strategy of provocation.⁵⁹ Lister asserts that “*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.*”⁶⁰ Zarqawists' calculation was simple – attack Shi'ites on every front, they will respond harshly towards Sunnis and we will come out as their saviours.

4. 2 az-Zarqawi Pledges Allegiance to al-Qaeda

The events described in previous chapter mark an evolution of insurgency from a proto-stage to a small insurgency stage. High profile attacks attracted more followers and TWJ started to grow larger. TWJ continued to ramp up its presence by further expanding its areas of operation for example to Fallujah in al-Anbar and also strengthened its position in the outskirts of Baghdad where it continued to target Coalition forces and Shi'ite civilians.⁶¹ They proved to be an excellent armed propaganda move to create perception of TWJ as a “strong element of Iraqi insurgency”.⁶² TWJ also very quickly passed the small insurgency phase, and I mark its end with the pledge of allegiance (bay'at) to al-Qaeda and bin Ladin in October 2004, when the organization became known as “al-Qaeda in Iraq” (AQI).⁶³

Az-Zarqawi was a considerable asset for al-Qaeda that is why bin Ladin agreed to accept his bay'at, despite the fact they had their differences which was later revealed in the 2005-correspondence between al-Qaeda's commander az-Zawahiri and az-Zarqawi.⁶⁴ al-Qaeda for example disagreed with brutality against Shi'ite civilians, destroying their mosques. After az-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to bin Ladin and al-Qaeda in October 2004, it was indeed the most “legitimate” actor to fight in jihad in Iraq, and it truly helped the organization to flourish. “*Due to its prominence and extensive international recruitment networks, [AQI – author's note] increasingly represented the center of a growing jihadi umbrella in Iraq, incorporating other similarly minded groups.*”⁶⁵ And indeed, Iraq was becoming a “training ground for global jihadists.”⁶⁶

5. November 2004-Early 2007: Path to Islamic State of Iraq

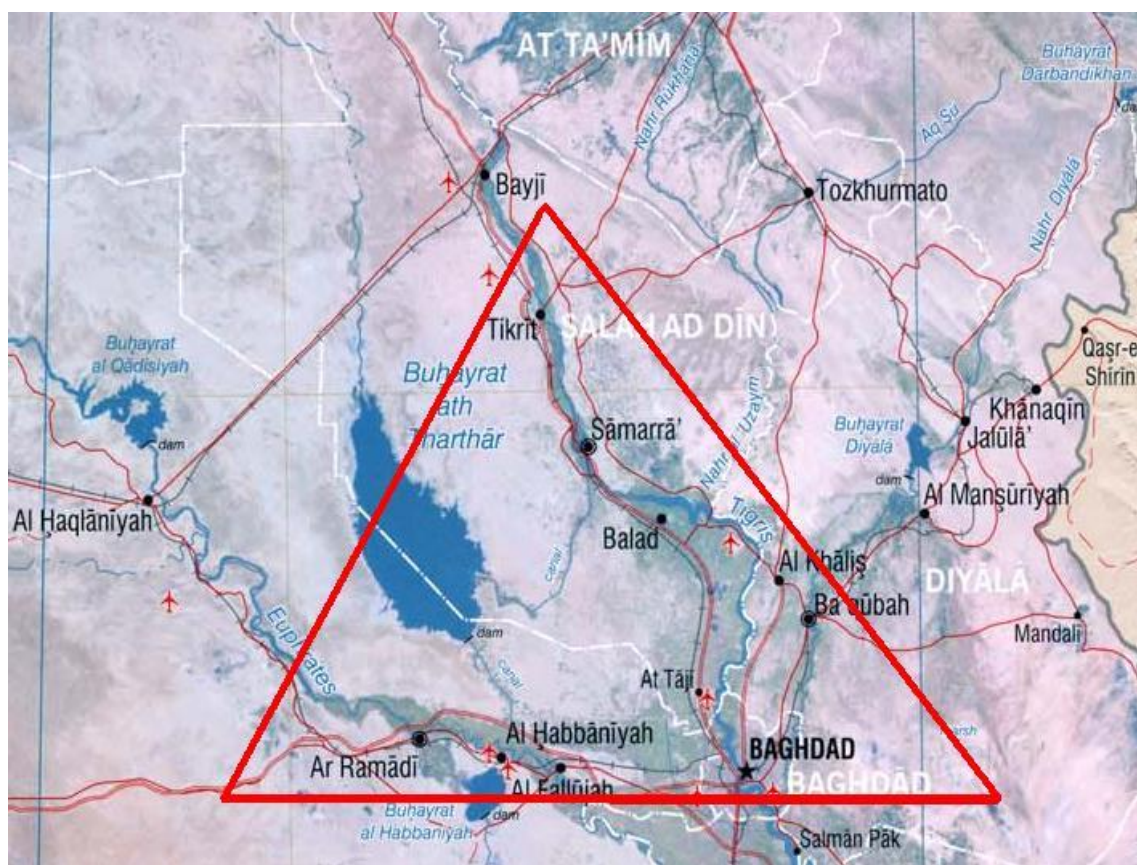
By the spring of 2004 the Sunni insurgency of Iraq started to bloom along with the general worsening of security situation in Iraq. The Coalition at that time started to feel that the George Bush's “mission accomplished” speech on May 1, 2003 highlighting that “*major combat operations in Iraq have ended*” was a bitter miscalculation.⁶⁷ Sunni (often dominated by ex-Ba'ath elements) and Shi'ite insurgents, criminal gangs, and radical Islamists (mainly AQI) were blooming and the situation rapidly worsened, reaching rock bottom in 2006.⁶⁸ In 2004, number of

civilian deaths reached 16.800, in 2005 more than 20.000, reaching its peak a year later with 34.500 deaths.⁶⁹

5. 1 al-Qaeda in Iraq Becomes Notorious

Although AQI and az-Zarqawi were getting incredible attention in media due to their atrocities, they were at that time only one of the elements of the brewing Sunni Insurgency in Iraq.⁷⁰ al-Shishani estimates⁷¹ that in the first two years of the US occupation (up to April 2005) only 14 % of insurgent's attacks can be attributed to az-Zarqawi's group (it is worth noting that in almost 50 % of cases the group used suicide bombings often in cars, which is still a typical *modus operandi* of AQI's successors). az-Zarqawi, however, reached by 2005 "(...) *legendary status. Glorified by militant Salafists and jihadists (...) as an invincible warrior, and villified by Western governments as the most dangerous terrorist on the planet.*"⁷² The strategy of targeting Shi'ites including civilians continued. In his final speech shortly before his death on June 7, 2006, az-Zarqawi exclaimed, "*The Muslims will have no victory (...) until there is a total annihilation of those under them, such as the apostate agents headed by the rafida.*"⁷³ (*rafida* – "those who reject" – is a derogatory term used for Shi'ites).

AQI at that time was especially active in conducting spectacular attacks in Baghdad „belts“ (especially in mixed Sunni-Shia districts).⁷⁴ az-Zarqawi focused (also according to later captured evidence) on urban operations in Baghdad belt in order to provoke sectarian violence, and due to its strategic significance since it contained important (industrial) infrastructure.⁷⁵ AQI was also building strong presence for example in city of Fallujah, the city of Baqubah northeast of Baghdad, and in Salah ad-Din province (in general, the area densely populated by Sunnis are located north of Baghdad called "The Sunni Triangle" (see map below)).⁷⁶



Map No. 5. 1: The Sunni Triangle of Iraq.⁷⁷

AQI's prominence rose and it attracted more individual recruits as well as smaller groups. In January 2006, it announced merger with five other groups (and probably dominated them) and renamed itself to "Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen" (MSM).⁷⁸ az-Zarqawi was finally killed by the US airstrike in the city of Baqubah in June 2006.⁷⁹ The following events mark a prelude to a major rift between al-Qaeda and az-Zarqawi's group. Abu Ayyub al-Masri was appointed as a new leader of MSM (which still remained loyal to al-Qaeda and bin Ladin). In a few months, Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was established under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. In November 2006, however, al-Masri pledged bay'ah to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and ISI, but al-Baghdadi formally did not pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda. As Lister notes *"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."*⁸⁰

6. Late 2007-April 2010: ISI Damaged

The Occupation forces and ISF were experiencing downward spiral of violence (see Graph No. 3: Casualties in Iraq since 2003). Indeed, not only due to ISI but also due to other Sunni Arab insurgent groups. Sunni revisionists (mostly people with Ba'ath past, or tribes connected to Saddam's old establishment) wished alter the post-war Iraqi regime once again in their favor. In Bard O'Neill's words⁸¹, groups like Izzat ad-Douri's "Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order", were preservationist insurgents who wanted to keep their prominent positions.⁸² While their short term goals (attacking the new Baghdad government and Coalition forces) were the same with ISI, their long-term ideas about the nature of „revised Iraq“ was naturally different. Nevertheless, due to tactical overlap of their interest ISI elements were often tactically cooperating with ex-Ba'ath insurgents.⁸³ The same ex-Ba'ath Sunni Arab insurgents within the umbrella group "General Council of the Iraqi Revolutionaries" (established in January 2014) also helped ISIS during its sweep through Sunni parts of Iraq in June 2014.⁸⁴

6.1 Sahwa's Initial Success against ISI

"Sahwa" (Awakening) or the "Sons of Iraq" (SoI) was a strategy that for the first time formalized in September 2006, when sheikh from the Dulaymi tribe, Abd as-Sattar ar-Rishawi, drew together some forty-five tribal leaders from Ramadi areas and convinced around 4.500 Sunni Arabs (including former anti-Coalition insurgents) to fight along the US and Baghdad.⁸⁵ Successful project, also nicknamed by the Coalition forces as „Concerned Local Citizens“ bloomed up to 80.000 militias by the end of 2007.⁸⁶ Sunni Arabs in militias were given promises to be paid first by the Coalition forces, and then by Baghdad itself with a further prospect of being integrated into regular Iraqi security forces, or scoring civilian jobs (often in public sector).⁸⁷ Sahwa project proved to be a short-term success and was targeting especially ISI.

Sahwa project skillfully exploited rising distaste of Sunni tribes towards ISI's conduct. Sunni tribes had their share of wealth and power during Saddam's times and were an indeed integral part of his patronage system. Tribes were taking part in black market operations, including smuggling, or racketeering under the auspices of Saddam's Vice President Izzat ad-Douri who specialized in overseeing state-sanctioned criminal enterprises.⁸⁸ Weiss and Hassan pointedly sum up the reasons for Sunni tribal distaste and ISI's mistakes: *"The tribes chafed at the implementation of a seventh-century civil code in areas ruled by fundamentalists, many of whom were foreign-born and behaved exactly as the colonial usurpers they were meant to expel. Tribal businesses were disrupted or taken over by those seeking their own monopoly on smuggling, and AQI protected its confiscated interest with a mafia's thuggish zeal. It justified killing on the basis of market competition."*⁸⁹

Cordesman also highlights rising discontent between „nationalist“ and „neo-salafist groups“ in 2006-2008.⁹⁰ Later on, the demand of keeping "Sunni insurgency for Iraqis" was

reflected in ISIS new strategy since now most of the cadres are Iraqis (especially in higher level⁹¹), and engage in Sunni tribal areas with increased caution and sharing wealth.⁹²

Joint operations of Coalition forces, Sons of Iraq (Sahwa), and ISF managed to weaken ex-Ba'ath groups, and ISI so their insurgency lost breath. Many of their commanders were killed and until early 2008, they were forced to operate "under the surface" once again. *"Coalition operations have degraded AQI's operational capabilities (...) by clearing the network out of several large sanctuaries and fracturing its lines of support throughout the country. As a result, remaining areas of AQI control are partly isolated from one another and likely operate somewhat independently."*⁹³ ISI was gradually forced to relocate to Mosul⁹⁴, which later proved to be an excellent move since the organization later rebuilt Mosul into its major "money-maker".⁹⁵

6. 2 ISI Severely Damaged?

By late 2006, ISI was raising its estimated income to 70-200 million dollars a year.⁹⁶ It was consisting of black market operations, racketeering, kidnapping for ransom, and most importantly oil smuggling, namely from Bayji refineries and oil fields. Its radicalism and ferocious aggressive criminal networks tempering with local Sunni tribes' gray and black market enterprises after all brought tribes against them. ISI suffered and its networks were damaged, many of them isolated, but it was still able to keep its presence in Mosul and to exploit Bayji "oil asset". Shatz⁹⁷ estimates that between 2006 and 2009, the organization was despite setbacks able to raise in total 2 billion dollars from oil business.

ISI leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed in April 2010 in the joint ISF and the US operation close to Tikrit along with several other senior ISI commanders.⁹⁸ The organization was severely weakened and went undercover and was rather focusing more on raising money and establishing (and keeping) viable criminal networks, than on waging intensive campaign of violent attacks. As noted above, ex-Ba'athists were from the beginning of Sunni insurgency often tactically cooperating with ISI. Over time, however, many ex-Ba'ath figures "changed cloak" for radical Islamism (a more sounding root cause than discredited Ba'ath preservationist cause embedded in discredited ideology). Simultaneously with this process, ex-Ba'ath elements within the ISI were increasingly taking ground with their expertise, networks, and also tribal ties (on the origins of the "Unholy Alliance with the Ba'ath" see chapter 7. 1).

Then-CIA director Michael Hayden said in May 2008 that *"Nothing is guaranteed and everything's reversible in this world. But Al Qaeda is on the verge of a strategic defeat in Iraq."*⁹⁹ The first part of the statement proved to be true. In 2010, ISI *"(...) was still able to conduct attacks, but the organization was isolated, disrupted and did not pose an existential threat to the state."*¹⁰⁰ The intensity of ISI insurgency (and of Sunni insurgency in general) decreased considerably in 2009-2011 (for overview consult graphs in chapter 3). In 2009, there were only 5000 civilian deaths a year and the number steadily declined to 4000 civilian casualties in 2011. ISF also suffered only 700 losses in 2011, compared to almost 2000 in 2007.¹⁰¹

7. June 2010-April 2013: ISI Fully Rebuilt and Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham Declared

In June 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (now known as Caliph Ibrahim) came to power after the death of a former leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. According to defector from the group known on Twitter as @wikibaghdady, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's coming to power was a surprise since he most probably did not even belong among the senior figures.¹⁰²

7. 1 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Rise of ex-Ba'ath Elements within Islamic State of Iraq (and ash-Sham)

Only little is known about al-Baghdadi's life. He is Iraqi national, born in Samarra in 1971.¹⁰³ After the graduation from Islamic University in Baghdad, he moved to Fallujah and started to work as an assistant to local preachers, later possibly as an *imam*.¹⁰⁴ That is where his acquaintance with AQI began. Al-Baghdadi served reportedly merely as a low-rank "live letter box"¹⁰⁵ and a guardian of a safe house for the organization. However, he spent the years 2004-06 in the US detention facility of Camp Bucca¹⁰⁶, where he served his time along with Ba'athist and radical Islamist. After his release there is no information about his occupation within the organization, but he must have somehow climbed the ladder higher. Most probably, he had very close ties to Ba'athist figures within the organization since they staged his election as a new leader in 2010, and up to this date occupied the most prominent executive positions in leadership. One of the inmates¹⁰⁷ who spent time with al-Baghdadi in Camp Bucca said that "*none of us knew he would ever end up as leader.*" And further described him: "*I got a feeling from him that he was hiding something inside, a darkness that he did not want to show other people. (...) He was remote, far from us all.*"

ISIS wages multi-language propaganda campaign to create better biography for their leader (most of it are lies).¹⁰⁸ They derive his origin from al-Quraysh tribe (the Prophet's tribe – this lineage is condition to become the Caliph). Also his predecessor Abu Omar al-Baghdadi claimed that he was "al-Qurayshi"¹⁰⁹ in an obvious organization's attempt to gain religious legitimacy for its utopic Islamic state project. According to the narrative he holds Ph.D. in Islamic studies from Baghdad University, was a professor on Tikrit University, has vast combat experience and is a founder of several groups fighting the US. Soufan Group report comments this narrative as "inherently unlikely".¹¹⁰

The 2010 "coup" was staged with a support of the ex-Ba'athist elements in the organization, mainly ex-Colonel of the Iraqi Revolutionary Guard, known as Haji Bakr (died in combat in Syria in February 2014¹¹¹). Though information is scarce from this period, the subsequent development showed that ex-Ba'athist elements earned even more prominent position than before. After all, key figures¹¹² in the highest leadership are mostly Iraqi, ex-Saddam figures, such as deputy for Iraq (Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, ex-Saddam's military intelligence, and officer of the Special Forces of Republican Guard, killed by coalition airstrike in Mosul in November 2014) and Syria (Abu Ali al-Anbari, ex-major general of Saddam's army, replaced in leadership for unknown reasons in the end of 2014¹¹³). al-Baghdadi's organization increasingly co-opts Arab and foreign jihadists mostly to religious positions in order to gain more legitimacy (they have usually more prestigious religious education). However, key posts seem to remain dominated by Iraqi nationals, often with Ba'athist past.

Indeed, it was al-Baghdadi and ex-Ba'ath figures usually with past in the Saddam's security apparatus with their *know-how* and networks who further transformed the organization into a more capable body, especially regarding security, intelligence, and military operations. An unlikely alliance between secular pragmatic Ba'athists and radical Islamists was according to various sources also forged during the US occupation of Iraq when many of the members of IS organizational predecessors spent time in prisons (such as Camp Bucca) along with ex-Ba'athists insurgents.

Ba'athist ideology simply did not succeed in attracting many followers among Sunnis anymore. Therefore, alliance with the radical Islamists with sounding ideology seemed as a good strategic move, ensuring key positions within Sunni insurgency. Thus, their „ideological zeal“ for radical Islamist vision of Caliphate may be in many cases just a pragmatic cloak-changing. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate radical Islam as an ideological tool with a potential of gaining legitimacy, or attracting recruits by giving their struggle a label of religious legitimacy. (After all, as the conflict goes on, the growing generation of ISIS cadres will be very likely much more radical than the previous generation due to continuous religious indoctrination.)

On the other hand, many Ba'athists (especially security officials) had already established connections with radical Islamist circles in Iraq in the 1990s. Saddam Hussein's regime was flirting with a synthesis of Ba'athist ideology with Islamism since 1993, when he introduced a campaign called "The Return to Faith" (al-Hamlah al-Imaniyah).¹¹⁴ It was overseen by Saddam's right hand, a later vice president Izzat ad-Douri. This attempt to boost legitimacy by social Islamic conservatism proved to be a miscalculation in many ways that later made it easier for ex-Ba'ath figures to cooperate and connect with salafists. As a former US military intelligence officer Joel Rayburn noted: *"Saddam believed he was sending into the Islamic schools committed to Baathists who would remain loyal as they established foothold in the mosques from which the regime could then monitor or manipulate the Islamist movement. In actuality, the reverse happened. Most of the officers who were sent to the mosques were not deeply committed to Baathism by that point, and as they encountered Salafi teachings many became more loyal to Salafism than to Saddam."*¹¹⁵

7. 2 Sahwa Falls Asleep and al-Maliki's Government Does Not Keep Promises

Although the short term goal of Sahwa was achieved by increasing security and decreasing intensity of Sunni insurgency (and ISI's operations)¹¹⁶, the promised of their incorporation into Baghdad's security and governance structures was not kept. The Sons of Iraq (roughly 95.000 men in April 2008, 80 % Sunnis) were first paid by the US military around 300 dollars a month.¹¹⁷ In 2009, the Iraqi government overtook responsibility for paying Sahwa Sunni militias, and their transformation to alternative employment began. 20 % of them was supposed to be vetted and incorporated into police or the army, others were supposed to score government jobs, or private-sector jobs secured by Baghdad government.¹¹⁸ Al-Maliki's government was, however, not able (and not willing) to keep the promises given to Sahwa militias. At the end of 2010, only about 40 % of SoI scored a non-security employment (almost 9.000 of them got security-sector job).¹¹⁹ By early 2013, reliable data provided by the Iraqi government are scarce, and it only vaguely states that 70 % of Sahwa militias were given a job.¹²⁰ The real number is probably much lower.

Another problem was *"The pervasive feeling among SoI members and leaders is that the government is not doing enough to protect them."*¹²¹ Sahwa members were targeted in ISIS and its predecessors' terrorist attacks and assassinations. SoI lost hundreds of members each year (e. g. 528 in 2008), and attacks against them and their relatives continued. ISIS propaganda movie *Clanging of the Swords, Part IV* released in 2014 shows in numerous scenes assassinations of people with a Sahwa past. In June 2010, for example ISI killed at least forty-five SoI lining for collecting their paycheck in Baghdad.¹²² Commander of Sahwa from al-Anbar province Abu Kutaiba al-Shimmeri noted that *"We feel very sorry because we see that the Americans and the Iraqi government abandoned the Sahwa."*¹²³ He further complained that SoI are prosecuted by al-Maliki's judicial system and often locked up.¹²⁴ It is indeed not only a result of many Sahwa members' criminal history, but also an expression of deep al-Maliki's establishment distrust towards Sunni militias.

By the half of 2010, ISI was actually offering better salary to its militants than Sahwa members were getting often with delays from Baghdad.¹²⁵ This fact with the combination of SoI's deep-seated grievance towards al-Maliki's government which did not keep its promises and great deal of economic uncertainty and insecurity of them caused that many of Sahwa lower cadres eventually joined ISIS either as individuals, or small units (or their whole tribe pledged allegiance to ISIS).¹²⁶ Lower-level Sahwa members were also given possibility to "atone" for their sins, hand over their weapons and join ISIS cause after July 2014, as is shown in ISIS propaganda movies¹²⁷, or stated for example in Mosul's "charter of the city"¹²⁸.

In general, Sunnis were more and more expressing their distaste for sectarian politics of al-Maliki's governments which indeed promoted Shi'ites.¹²⁹ In December 30, 2013, a symbolic "trigger" of Sunni defiance occurred. It was a heavy-handed security operation in Ramadi, which resulted in dispersion „protests tent camp“, and death of at least seventeen Sunnis.¹³⁰ ISIS used it as an excuse to subsequently fuel mayhem by stream of bombings of Shi'ite targets, and thus provoked Baghdad's forces and their feared Shi'ite militias. The operation was indeed one of the

key breaking points and heralded ISIS success in earning sympathy (or at least getting brand of a “lesser evil”) among many Sunnis.

7. 3 ISI Expands to Syria

Since 2011, coinciding with an emerging civil war in Syria, al-Qaeda affiliates (may it be groups, or influential individuals) quickly started to take ground on the battlefield and foreign fighters flooded to the country.¹³¹ This process was facilitated by already established strong ties of jihadists to Syria and existence of their networks. After the 2003 invasion, Bashar Assad opted for a policy choice to gain support (or at least tolerance) of jihadists fighting against the US occupation.¹³² At the same time he “hosted” many ex-Ba’ath figures who fled after the US invasion to Syria, reportedly including above mentioned Saddam’s vice president Izzat ad-Douri.¹³³ Damascus pursued this policy with an obvious attempt to warn the US not to even think about bringing similar fate to Assad’s regime. Assad also believed that if he kept “jihadist troublemakers” on the leash and gave them opportunity to fight in Iraq, he would divert their attention from Syria itself.¹³⁴ Indeed, he also wanted to create a perception of indispensability of Syria’s regime in “war on terrorism in the region”. It capitalized for example in 2010, when Assad’s chief spy Ali Mamlouk met with Department of State’s counterterrorism coordinator Daniel Benjamin and offered cooperation on cracking down jihadists.¹³⁵

As soon as there was a power vacuum, al-Qaeda affiliates exploited existing networks and ties and simply reversed the stream of money, weapons and fighters this time from Iraq to Syria. Around August 2011, al-Baghdadi seized the opportunity and started to send small batches of its operatives to Syria, including Abu Muhammad al-Julani, close al-Baghdadi’s aide and future emir of Jabhat an-Nusra. Al-Julani (already senior commander of AQI) opted a strategy of presenting an-Nusra as a “Syria-grown” group, which announced its existence officially on January 24, 2012 in a video posted on al-Manara al-Bayda website.¹³⁶ al-Julani’s an-Nusra confused many analytics, since nobody knew exactly where it came from.¹³⁷ It indeed quickly grew and became one of the prominent opposition groups throughout 2012 and 2013. As it was officially sanctioned by al-Qaeda’s az-Zawahiri in the first half of 2013, it became the main platform in Syria for flooding foreign fighters from all over the world.¹³⁸

Another batches of ISI’s operatives were coming to Syria in late 2012, including ex-colonel of Saddam’s air force intelligence know as Haji Bakr (a close aide of al-Baghdadi who helped to put him in charge of ISI in 2010). Nicknamed as the “Lord of Shadows” he established himself around Aleppo. He is considered as one of the main architects of the contemporary ISIS’ organizational structure and its security and intelligence apparatus.¹³⁹ Reportedly, Haji Bakr sketched a strategy to expand to Syria, establish presence there and subsequently use it as the main base for retaking parts of Iraq.¹⁴⁰ He was eventually killed in the shootout in Tal Rifaat close to Aleppo in January 2014.¹⁴¹ Haji Bakr’s operations were aimed at establishing base for official expansion of ISI to Syria. It was eventually announced in April 2013, when organization itself changed its name to Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS).¹⁴² By that time ISI was indeed already established in Syria and Haji Bakr also managed to covertly obtain support of the groups of fighters from an-Nusra and other jihadist groups such as Liwa at-Tawhid, or Ahrar ash-Sham. These people later after April 2013 openly changed allegiance to ISIS.¹⁴³

7. 4 “Iraqization” and “Breaking the Walls Campaign”

A process that also raised ISI’s attractiveness within Iraq was a gradual “Iraqization” of its membership. The organization learned its lesson realizing distaste of Sunni (tribal) population with “foreigners” within the organization in 2006-2009. Of course ISIS still employs foreign fighters¹⁴⁴ but in most cases indeed not in leadership position.¹⁴⁵ Also it seems that many of the foreign fighters “causing trouble” in Iraq were moved to operate in Syria, after the resurgence of then-ISI’s franchise Jabhat an-Nusra in 2012. *“This improved its social grounding, and operations at the provincial and local levels were designed with community dynamics in mind. It*

also gave ISI an enhanced ability to acquire intelligence sources within the Iraqi security apparatus—something it has since exploited extensively.”¹⁴⁶ “Iraqization” of ISI came hand in hand with rising prominence of ex-Ba’ath figures as noted above.

A breaking point that heralded an increased intensity of ISI’s insurgency was July 2012, when the organization announced a year along campaign called “Breaking the Walls”. By July 2013, ISI managed to free up to several thousand prisoners (most of them with insurgency past, or even directly members of ISI).¹⁴⁷ Final attack of this campaign targeted symbolic Abu Ghraib prison from which more than 500 prisoners escaped. Majority of them were serving sentence for terrorist activities.¹⁴⁸ Lister points out that it was part of ISI’s “reconstruction” since “By early 2010, ISI also sought to rebuild its senior leadership—34 of the group’s 42 most senior officials had been killed or captured, with only some being adequately replaced.”¹⁴⁹ In 2010, it had only estimated 1000 members in Iraq, in 2012 the number reached 2500¹⁵⁰ was most probably even higher.

By that time, ISI was also able to expand its area of operation within Iraq. Besides stable presence in Mosul, it again secured stronger presence in al-Anbar and Salah ad-Din provinces. It also resurged in Diyala province northeast of Baghdad, and in late 2012 it was controlling ground – for example the town of Sadiy’ah, and was expanding along Diyala river valley further southwest to cities like Baqubah.¹⁵¹

By the time, when ISI changed its name to „Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham“ in April 2013, marking its official expansion to Syria, its insurgency became more intense again, ISIS was successfully rebuilt and expanded to Syria. Suicide bombing campaign in Iraq started to heat up. Monthly death toll rose to 1.000 by July 2013, compared to around 300 deaths in 2011.¹⁵² In 2013, almost 10.000 civilians were killed, compared to 4.000-4.500 deaths in 2010-2012.¹⁵³

8. May 2013-May 2015: Management of Savagery and the ISIS „Caliphate“

8. 1 Taking Ground in Syria while Divorcing with al-Qaeda

In March 2013, Jabhat an-Nusra’s forces as a vanguard to a larger rebel pursue took ar-Raqqah from Assad’s forces – the first provincial city that the regime lost.¹⁵⁴ On April 8, 2013, al-Baghdadi declared that “So when the situation in the Levant reached the point it did in terms of bloodshed, transgression against honor, and the cries of help from the people of the Levant and the world’s abandonment of them, we had to rise to come and support them. We deputized al-Julani, and he is one of our soldiers, and with him a group of our sons, and we pushed them from Iraq to the Levant so as to meet our cells in the Levant.”¹⁵⁵ He also announced merger of an-Nusra and ISIS. al-Julani, however, declined the “offer” and pledged bay’at to al-Qaeda’s az-Zawahiri.¹⁵⁶ az-Zawahiri tried to intervene in quarrel between his two “children” in a communiqué published in al-Jazeera in June 2013, where he claimed that both were wrong since they acted without al-Qaeda’s sanctioning: al-Baghdadi was wrong with declaration of ISIS, al-Jolani was wrong with claiming his bay’at to az-Zawahiri without his say-so.¹⁵⁷ He also ordered dissolution of ISIS and keeping the two organizations separated – one in Iraq, one in Syria.¹⁵⁸

In June 2014, when al-Baghdadi declared Caliphate in Mosul sermon, the continuation of the rift was imminent. ISIS spokesman al-Adnani stated “We inform the Muslims that, with the announcement of the caliphate, it has become obligatory for all Muslims to give bay’a and support to Caliph Ibrahim.”¹⁵⁹ This was indeed a slap in the face of az-Zawahiri’s organization. az-Zawahiri naturally refused al-Baghdadi’s claims, and subsequently introduces “counter-Caliph” – legendary Taliban leader Mullah Omar.¹⁶⁰ An ideological battle still continues and both al-Qaeda and ISIS have been competing for pledges of allegiance from groups not only in Syria, but also for example in Maghrib, or Arabian Peninsula.¹⁶¹

Throughout 2013, ISIS successfully managed to gradually extent its grip in Syria (especially in the areas of ar-Raqqah, Dair az-Zaur, or Aleppo). ISIS managed to do so despite often being targeted by other opposition groups. ISIS eventually made its move to assume

complete control over ar-Raqqah in January 2014 and expelled other rebel groups.¹⁶² At that time many opposition groups and Syrian tribes previously being in alliance with opposition groups changed their cloak and revealed their allegiance to ISIS.¹⁶³ It was also a result of a careful ISIS' infiltration of other rebel groups and a "tribal outreach". Subsequently, for many rebels it was simply more prestigious, and economically more beneficial group to join. ISIS now controls and governs vast areas in Syria (Dair az-Zaur, areas around Aleppo, Manbij...), and it has considerable success, except for faltered attempt to capture Kobanî in late 2014.¹⁶⁴ ISIS' success in Syria was also boosted by weapons and ammunition acquired after the fall of Mosul and other Sunni Iraqi cities. Vast supplies up to this day provide ISIS with superior weaponry, although its convoys are often targeted by airstrikes anti-ISIS Coalition's operation Inherent Resolve (as of May 2015 sorties destroyed around 80 tanks, and 300 humvees¹⁶⁵). Only with the fall of Ramadi in May 2015, ISF reportedly left behind hundreds of tanks, artillery pieces, humvees and armored personnel carriers to ISIS.¹⁶⁶

Interesting point is that Assad's and ISIS' forces are not often in direct military engagement. One of the exceptions is taking city of Palmyra in May 2015.¹⁶⁷ It is a part of silent temporary marriage of convenience, when Assad calculates that ISIS is a good tool to weaken other opposition militants, and also that the West will eventually come around and make a deal with him to counter ISIS. On the other hand, ISIS is pretty happy that it does not have another intensive battlefield to maintain.

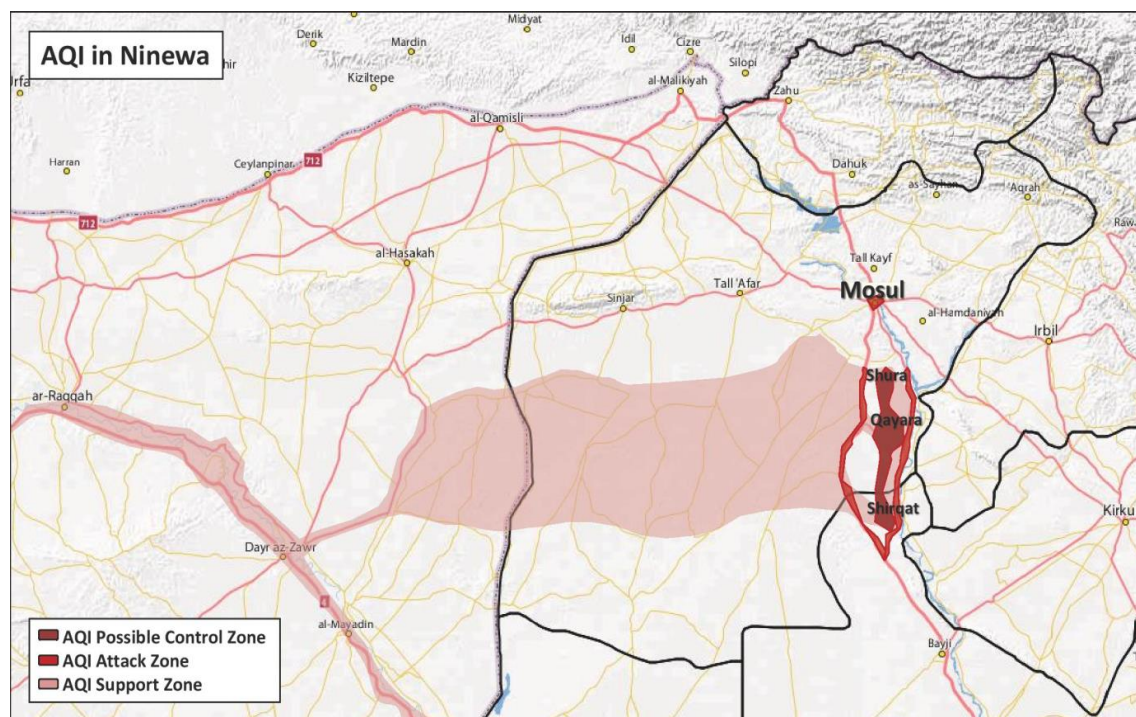
8. 2 A Path to Declaration of Caliphate in Iraq and Beyond

Right after ISIS finalized its "Breaking the Walls Campaign" by attacking Abu Ghraib prison, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani (now ISIS spokesman) immediately announced a campaign called "Soldier Harvest" (on July 29, 2013).¹⁶⁸ In the second half of 2013, ISIS already renewed its pool of experienced cadres by freeing hundreds of them from prisons during the "Breaking the Walls Campaign". At the same time the organization's direct presence began to be visible and their presence was felt strongly even outside their undeclared headquarters in Mosul.¹⁶⁹ al-Adnani kept his July 29 promise of reclaiming territory controlled previously by AQI.

In 2013, ISIS had already started skirmishes and operations that established their more open presence in key areas of Ninawa or Salah ad-Din (Ninawa is indeed strategic province since it is neighboring with Syria and ISIS needs it to have comfortable connection with their operations in Syria).¹⁷⁰ ISIS also made its move to harass ISF in Mosul area, where Iraqi forces had strong presence unlike in more sparsely populated desert areas where ISIS already enjoyed freedom of movement. As Lewis notes: *"ISF presence in the city is extensive, but Iraqi Army and Federal Police are also socially ostracized and mismatched against the demographic of the population."*¹⁷¹ Mosul is also largely divided city, with competing fractions of Kurds, Christians, salafist Ansar as-Sunna, Ba'athist groups etc. ISIS then can promote sectarian violence by targeting minorities and at the same time pose as a savior and promoter of Sunni interest. Attacks on Sunni population by hated ISF and Sahwa members ramped up and population welcomed them.¹⁷² At the same time ISIS operatives were targeting anti-Baghdad but non-complying with ISIS tribal and political leaders in the area with cold-blooded calculation getting rid of any political opposition. Tens of notables were assassinated by ISIS. For example on August 27, ISIS killed leader of the Bagran tribes in Mosul, Barza Hazim al-Badrani, south of Mosul.¹⁷³ Such approach is indeed hallmark of brutal, yet effective, ISIS strategy in prelude to assuming full control of given area – co-optation of willing and coercion or killing any possible other center of political power.

ISIS subsequently pushed for example along Mosul-Baghdad highway to disrupt supply lines for ISF stationed in Ninawa (see Map No. 8. 2: ISIS Activities in Ninawa in 2013). Expansion in Salah ad-Din, al-Anbar, and to Diyala provinces occurred.¹⁷⁴ ISF were not successful in containing insurgents. An autumn/winter large-scale offensive in 2013 aiming at retaking parts of Diyala river valley from ISIS was partially successful and drove militants into hiding.¹⁷⁵ On the other hand, ISIS soon responded with counter-offensive in al-Anbar province in

January 2014 during which symbolic city of Fallujah fall and ISIS assumed control other over strategic west of Baghdad territory.¹⁷⁶



Map No. 8. 2: ISIS Activities in Ninawa in 2013.¹⁷⁷

For the first half of 2014, ISIS violent campaign and spreading direct presence continued. Indeed, it was not a sudden move but in many ways moving in into for years prepared positions. Sleeper cells were activated, ISIS members blend in among the population and conducting covertly criminal enterprises or preparing terrorist attacks simply came out of shadows.¹⁷⁸ There were not so many “offensive units” *per se* conducting military-like offensives even in June 2014. It is estimated that ISIS had just some 10 thousand militants prior June 2014 in Iraq and Syria combined¹⁷⁹ and cities manned with thousands or Iraqi soldiers were falling into hands of only hundreds militants coming to towns (typical example is Mosul¹⁸⁰ where 30.000 ISF members simply fled amid attack of just some 800 militants freeing reportedly hundreds additional manpower from prisons during the attack¹⁸¹). Not only ISF were demoralized¹⁸², but collapse was also result of chronically flawed planning, leadership and ill training.¹⁸³ Initially, ISIS also cooperated with other Sunni rebel groups often with ex-Ba’athist background, since their tactical interest driving out Baghdad forces overlapped (such as Izzat ad-Douri’s loose alliance called “General Council of Iraqi Revolutionaries”, operating mainly north of Baghdad, or “1920 Brigades”).¹⁸⁴ These alliances were only short-term alliances, and ISIS eventually marginalized them by incorporation, coercion, and liquidation.

June 2014 is indeed a breaking point since ISIS conducted sweep through Sunni areas, advancing to Mosul, Baiji, Samarra, or even Tikrit, almost reaching outskirts of Baghdad. But fighting was intensive even in 2013 with 10.000 dead civilians, and 2.300 ISF members - indicator of a success of the “Soldier Harvest Campaign”, since a year before ISF lost just 800 men (see graphs in chapter 3). Only for the first half of 2014, 10.300 civilians were killed, and reportedly several thousands of ISF members (there are no clear figures). ISIS in June reached the fourth stage of its insurgency, it reached “military equilibrium” – a point at which it was able to meet ISF in an open battlefield. The Caliphate was then declared at the end of June 2014 with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as “Caliph Ibrahim” in charge. In late 2014, CIA also increased estimated manpower of ISIS from previously stated 10.000 to 20.000-31.500.¹⁸⁵ Current estimates go even much higher up to 100.000 or more militants (included support personnel).¹⁸⁶

ISIS has considerable success in controlling territory. However, their grip is tight and presence stable only in major cities such as Mosul.¹⁸⁷ In rural areas and in smaller towns, it relies on local Sunni tribal allies which pledged loyalty to them openly, or cooperate with them “unofficially”. ISIS apparently learned its lesson from 2005-2006, when it angered Sunni tribes which turned back on them and many of the tribes joined Sahwa. Sunni tribes cooperate with ISIS, and tribes or tribal militias who defy ISIS rule are being targeted (such as killings of hundreds Albu Nimr tribesmen loyal to Baghdad in November 2014¹⁸⁸). Prominent Sahwa commanders are targeted by ISIS, but it seems regular members have chance to “atone” and join ISIS (as it is shown for example Clanging of the Swords Part IV movie¹⁸⁹). Indeed, ISIS exploited presence of ex-Ba’athist figures within its ranks which have expertise in intelligence operations. Apparently ISIS had long lists nurtured over the years of covert presence that contained names of possible opposition, security forces members, people loyal to Baghdad, and along with ISIS’ assuming the control of territory it immediately came for such “inconvenient people” and murdered them (it is often shown in their propaganda outlets to disown fear into possible opposing people and groups¹⁹⁰). The number of assassinated is hard to estimate, but it is an established pattern in each ISIS-taken area, so numbers are most probably in many thousands.

8. 3 ISIS in 2015

A long proclaimed “spring offensive” in April/May aiming at retaking the main center of ISIS – Mosul did not occur.¹⁹¹ In the end of February 2015, the US officials admitted that the offensive would not take place.¹⁹² ISF supported by Shi’ite militias and their Iranian backers conducted offensive to retake Tikrit, which as of May 2015 remains under control of Baghdad. Offensive operations, however, ceased there. Feared Shi’ite militias¹⁹³ (indeed strengthening Sunnis compliance with ISIS harsh rule) reportedly moved to Tikrit and commit atrocities on Sunni civilians.¹⁹⁴ ISIS counter-operation in May 2015 resulted in the fall of yet another major city of Ramadi in al-Anbar province.¹⁹⁵ ISF fled in panic amid ISIS offensive in direction to Baghdad, leaving arms and ammunition along with hundreds of military vehicles and armored carriers behind to fall in the hands of ISIS militants.¹⁹⁶ In Syria, ISIS conducted major offensive to take the strategic city of Palmyra in May 2015¹⁹⁷, and in general engaged in offensive operation mostly against other opposition groups. Tactical success with breaking the siege of Kobani did not damage ISIS military capabilities although it ties considerable number of their forces to contain Kurdish forces.

Anti-ISIS Coalition’s airstrike seem to achieve successes in targeting senior ISIS commanders. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself was seriously injured in March 2015 (he might be even incapacitated).¹⁹⁸ In May, a man who temporarily replaced him, Abu Alaa al-Afri, was reportedly killed in an airstrike in Tal Afar west of Mosul along with other senior cadres.¹⁹⁹ US Delta Force commando conducted a ground operation in Syria close to Dair az-Zaur in May that killed Abu Sayyaf – a figure behind ISIS economical operations, nicknamed “emir of oil and gas”.²⁰⁰ Killing commanders indeed cannot eradicate ISIS problem, but it can seriously damage and disrupt the organisation. After all, even ISIS has only limited number of truly charismatic and skilful leaders, and subsequent internal struggle for leadership can also discard seemingly coherent organisation.

ISIS governance is, on the other hand, considerably faltering in controlled territories. Basic services like running water, electricity, garbage disposal, healthcare are scarce in the cities like ar-Raqqa, or Mosul.²⁰¹ Economic system in controlled territories is also in decline – prices of basic goods and food are rising.²⁰² This development itself, however, cannot beat ISIS. It can only damage it and stretch its manpower and resources, since it must resort into increased coercion to ensure compliance of the population. ISIS also seems to uphold their tribal alliances which ensure it does not need to have direct strong presence in rural areas. Most Sunni tribes both in Syria and Iraq still opt for ISIS facing either coercion, but in most cases due to incentives in form of for example a share in criminal enterprises, and by leaving them alone in exchange for their loyalty.

8. 4 Abu Bakr Naji's "Management of Savagery" Comes to Life

ISIS strategy, especially after 2011, clearly resembles work of, up to this date "*rising star in the jihadi movement*", Abu Bakr Naji (*nom de guerre*), whose work was published online in 2004.²⁰³ Abu Bakr Naji, in his *Idarat al-Tawahhush*²⁰⁴ "Management of Savagery", sometimes translated as "Administration of Barbarism"), draws up a "grand strategy" of how to defeat superpowers, meaning mainly the US, and also illustrates path to establishment of Islamic State.²⁰⁵ Naji gathers his inspiration in previous breaking jihadi works: *Milestones on the Road* by Sayyid Qutb²⁰⁶, or az-Zawahiri's well-known book *The Knights under the Prophet's Banner*,²⁰⁷ or monstrous 1600-page book of the senior al-Qaeda ideologue known as Abu Musa'ab as-Suri.²⁰⁸

Naji urges jihadists to carefully study Western works on administration to gain the ability to govern controlled territories; sociology to understand how to engage with tribal structures, or military strategy to better conduct military operations. ISIS adheres to these principles not only in waging a skillful propaganda by using Western technology, but also urges "Western-educated" Muslim experts to come to Caliphate to help.²⁰⁹ ISIS also openly for Muslim experts from abroad to come and help with "state-building" in the text named "*A Call to all Muslims, scholars, doctors, engineers, and specialists*" which was published in an English-written magazine Dabiq.²¹⁰ "Learning from the enemy" is, however, something that has resonated in the works of jihadist movement for years; it is not a thing newly employed by ISIS.

Naji also introduces his strategic path to establishment of Caliphate in three steps. The first step is called "vexation and exhaustion" and aims at attacking sensitive targets (such as oil and other infrastructure) in order to make counterinsurgent to guard these critical places. Subsequently, counterinsurgent will pullout his forces from peripheral areas and many towns which creates security vacuum. In existing chaos, jihadists move in and provide population with administration and basic services, gaining the sympathy of the population. It is indeed what happened in Syria in 2013, when in many areas ISIS was welcomed as a "stabilizer" which expelled other rebels.²¹¹ In the case of Iraq, ISIS was also greeted by many as a protector of Sunni interest against Shi'ites.

In the second phase called "administration of savagery"²¹², there are areas administered by jihadists, sort of network of jihadist „mini-states“. These are later carefully connected to each other and work as a network which eventually leads to the final stage – establishment of Caliphate (Naji, however, does not discuss in detail transformation from the second to the final third stage). ISIS had moved to through the second and third stage already and effectively controls vast areas where it attempts to govern (albeit it proves to be hardly sustainable governance in the long term²¹³).

Naji asserts that there is not „softness“ since "*Regardless of whether we use harshness or softness, our enemies will not be merciful to us if they seize us. Thus, it behooves us to make them think one thousand times before attacking us.*"²¹⁴ ISIS adheres to its idea and invests considerable resources into sowing fear not only among existing enemies (e. g. well-propagated beheadings and mass executions of members of opposing security forces), potential enemies (mass killing of Sunni Albu Nimr tribesmen in Iraq in November 2014 who worked for Baghdad government in past²¹⁵), but also within its own population (public executions of „defiant“ civilians, alleged „spies“ etc.). As Crooke notes: "*In sum, the beheadings and other violence practiced by ISIS are not some whimsical, crazed fanaticism, but a very deliberate, considered strategy. The military strategy pursued by ISIS in Iraq, too, is neither spontaneous nor some populist adventure, but rather reflects very professional well-prepared military planning. The seemingly random violence has a precise purpose: It's aim is to strike huge fear; to break the psychology of a people (...).*"²¹⁶

ISIS widely promotes sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi'ites (also by staging attacks against Shia civilian targets to provoke hatred for Sunnis, which has been hallmark of their strategy since 2004), and then presents itself as the only group that can save Sunnis facing Shi'ites revenge.²¹⁷ Naji describes the process as a "policy of polarization", when "*Dragging the masses into the battle requires more actions which will inflame opposition and which will make the people enter into the battle, willing or unwilling, such that each individual will go to the side*

which he supports. We must make this battle very violent, such that death is a heartbeat away, so that the two groups will realize that entering this battle will frequently lead to death."²¹⁸

Another interesting point of Abu Bakr Naji that ISIS skillfully employs is engagement with the Sunni tribes (perhaps more due to ISIS' own painful experience when Sunni tribes turned against them in 2007-2008 in Iraq during Sahwa campaign). ISIS offers them their share of wealth and power (e. g. in criminal networks), collects their bay'ats, and in most areas "leave them alone" if they are loyal to ISIS.²¹⁹ Naji also asserts that jihadists must learn to better engage with tribal and ethnic groups to exploit them properly. As Brachman and McCants note, "*Naji advocates buying off tribal leaders and justifies his position by adducing examples of the Prophet doing the same.*"²²⁰

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Hassan Hassan claims that "Management of Savagery" was and still is circulated among ISIS cadres as one of the main books used to justify and illustrate its strategy.²²¹ After all, given Naji's prominence, it is highly probable that many of the higher cadres from beheading Syrian and Iraqi borders know his work. There are reports that it is often read by al-Qaeda in Yemen²²², or ash-Shabaab in Somalia²²³. Michael Ryan²²⁴ points out that in the first issue of an English-written ISIS magazine "The Return of Khilafah", ISIS simply copies Naji's above mentioned three stages and adheres them to az-Zarqawi's thinking. "*Dabiq comments that al-Zarqawi had intended to initiate wider and more complex attacks in Iraq to consolidate these jihadist-administered areas into a state, using Naji's term for establishing an Islamic state, "tamkin".*"²²⁵ ISIS indeed passed to the stage when it fueled chaos, exploited it and moved in as a savior of population (both in Syria and Iraq), and started to "manage the savagery" by providing governance. The third stage – establishment of Islamic State has also already happened in June 2014. Note that Naji considers jihadist-established "administrations of barbarism" rather as a network that has to carefully maintain connections between its parts in order to establish viable Caliphate. It is indeed the case of ISIS which fully controls few key major centers (ar-Raqqah, Mosul, Dair az-Zaur...) and in other areas it only has limited presence, and relies on tribal allies.²²⁶

On the other hand, Naji worries about targeting other Muslims and subsequently losing "perception battle" for the global jihadist cause while attacking civilians, which indeed puts a break on the above mentioned "policy of polarization".²²⁷ He identifies it as the main weakness of the contemporary jihadist movement. That is something that ISIS does not respect much and rather carries on az-Zarqawi's legacy of attacking civilians targets, fueling sectarian violence, and spreading "savagery". Many contemporary articles ignore this "break" and rather focus only on some parts of Naji's works.²²⁸ As Brachman and McCants note that Naji still strongly reflects thinking of al-Qaeda's High Command throughout 1990s.²²⁹ Abu Bakr Naji draws a strategy how to establish "Caliphate on the ground" in the first part of his book but in the rest of the text he is still in the al-Qaeda's global jihad mindset, which much more carefully wages "perception battles". And al-Qaeda's az-Zawahiri numerous times warned ISIS and its predecessors that it should not deliberately target civilians.²³⁰

9. Conclusion

Renewed Sunni insurgency had been brewing for several years in Iraq. ISIS sudden sweep through Sunni areas of Iraq pushing fleeing ISF in June 2014 should not have struck us as a surprise. Now, ISIS controls vast areas in Syria and Iraq with population of up to 5 million people under its reign. Despite numerous efforts of ISF, their Iranian backers, and the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition there has not been any decisive military success combating ISIS. Breaking the siege of Kobani in the end of 2014 and retaking Tikrit were merely tactical advances overshadowed by ISIS' conquest of strategic city of Palmyra in Syria and Ramadi in al-Anbar province in Iraq in May 2015.

This paper argues that it is useful to approach ISIS campaign within the broad concept of insurgency. Rich literature on insurgency and counterinsurgency that bloomed after the Western experience in Iraq and Afghanistan offers a solid framework for analysis. RAND Corporation

introduces three stages that each insurgency goes through in order to reach the final fourth stage of conventional warfare, when it is able to meet counterinsurgent on the open battlefield (ISIS entered this stage in June 2014 in Iraq and in late 2013 in Syria). Presented work offers a comprehensive narrative of a lifespan of ISIS insurgency in Iraq (and Syria) in the period of 2003-2015. The narrative is based on the RAND's framework of a lifespan of insurgency.

The paper clearly shows that the organization known as al-Qaeda in Iraq lead by infamous Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi quickly earned prominence within Sunni insurgency after 2003. AQI (in 2006 renamed to ISI) became the main platform for jihadists in Iraq also due to its brand of "official al-Qaeda franchise" for Iraq. If a proto-insurgency is not countered at this vulnerable and weak state, it gradually evolves into small scale insurgency, as it happened with major bombing campaigns in Baghdad in summer 2003. Terrorist and occasional guerrilla attacks are the major symptoms at the first stage; insurgents also attract more followers, get attention in media. In September 2004, when az-Zarqawi's group pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda it moved to large insurgency phase reaching its peak in late 2006.

ISI was then largely suppressed in the Sahwa campaign throughout 2007 and 2008, went into hiding, and focused on their criminal activities. After the US pull-out finished in 2011, and with the emerging war in Syria, ISI had once again got a chance to ramp up its insurgency to large scale stage. It exploited sectarian policies of predominantly al-Maliki's government in Iraq posing itself as the only force able to protect Sunnis. Syria became a welcomed battlefield to easily exploit. ISI officially announced an expansion to Syria in April 2013 and renamed itself as ISIS (by that time, however, it already had strong presence there). Damaged ISIS managed to incredibly exploit a window of opportunity in Syria and a power vacuum when the US pulled out and reconstructed itself. By 2013, the level of violence and ISIS ability to be seen "in the streets" in many ways resembled the situation in 2006.

Finally, ISIS made a decisive move to take key Sunni areas of Iraq. An already established base in Syria (with center in ar-Raqqah) served as a launching pad. In June 2014, ISIS entered a "conventional stage" while taking Mosul and moving further south in direction of Baghdad. As ISF ran away in panic, military equipment was left behind, effectively used by ISIS to support its campaign in Syria. Also the Caliphate lead by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was established in June 2014. In 2015, ISIS managed to keep up its pace and despite optimistic accounts on expected "spring offensive" aiming to retake Mosul, there has been no major military success fighting ISIS.

10. List of Abbreviations

AQI – al-Qaeda in Iraq

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

IS – Islamic State

ISF – Iraqi Security Forces

ISI – Islamic State of Iraq

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham

MSM – Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (Mujahideen Shura Council)

RAND – Research and Development Corporation

SoI – Sons of Iraq

TWJ – at-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (Unity and Jihad)

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