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## Mobilizing the Caliphate: ISIS and the Conflict in Iraq and Syria

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### *Summary*

This paper looks at the organization Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It argues against the prevailing view that ISIS is a part of the Global Salafi Jihad, finding instead that ISIS is a product of the sectarian strife in Iraq and Syria. While many may assume that ISIS's supporters are little more than fanatical jihadists, I argue that given what we know about other domestic conflicts, ISIS members are more likely to join the fighting as a result of material incentives and the consequences of violence itself. Using daily interval event data I show that ISIS is more a sectarian insurgency than an international terror organization. I then explore the ways in which the conflict in Iraq and Syria helps ISIS solve its collective action problem. I find that Shia violence against Sunnis, ISIS's material resources, and ability to govern all contribute to the likely growth of, at least, tacit support for ISIS among Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria.

*Keywords:* ISIS, Iraq, Syria, Conflict, Sunni Communities

### **Introduction**

The establishment of an Islamic Caliphate by the group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) might appear as the pinnacle achievement of the global Islamist movement. After all, this is what Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda claimed as their goal since the late 1990s; however, in this paper I offer that the dynamics in the current conflict in Iraq and Syria is less about Islamism, terrorism and what is often referred to as the Global Salafi Jihad (Sageman 2004), than it is about Iraq and the broader region's sectarian politics.

While ISIS may be regarded by many as a form of the "New Terrorism", i.e. terrorism that is primarily religiously inspired, overly zealous and without the traditional constituent constraints found in secular or ethnic based insurgent groups (Hoffman 2013), using data on violent attacks in Iraq and Syria for 2013, I argue

that rather than a war stemming from the Islamist ideology and religious zeal, the current conflict in Iraq is a sectarian civil war. After providing evidence in support of this first assertion, I then draw on the domestic conflict and mobilization literature to better explain why individuals might be willing to fight for ISIS, how ISIS interacts with its constituents in a bid for broader support, and how the group's leaders materially benefit from the conflict. All of which paint a more compelling, rigorous, and nuanced picture of the conflict's dynamics than one in which the ongoing violence is primarily seen as the consequence of extreme ideological commitment.

### **Local Islamists**

Though ignored by many policy-makers and the media, most so-called Islamist movements do not aspire to global conquest (Hoffman 2013), nor are they members of what Sageman refers to as the Global Salafi Jihad (2004). Rather, groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, Boko Haram and other Islamic terror groups are rooted in national/political conflicts concerning a given state or situation. Most of these groups do not meet the criteria of the "New Terrorism" which argues that they are more ideological, religious, irrational and fanatical than previous ethno-nationalist and secular ideological terror groups (Hoffman 2013; Brown 2007).

In the wake of such brutal actions like the beheading of journalists, aid workers, and soldiers, public crucifixions, and other horribly violent acts perpetrated by ISIS, it is hard to argue that ISIS does not consist of ideological or religious fanatics. Yet, all civil wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been witness to very high and nearly constant levels of violence, much of it barbaric (Francisco 2010; Brown 2013). When trying to understand the situation in Syria and Iraq it is important to remember that civil wars are the most violent form of domestic conflict (Francisco 2010) and as a result they are inherently chaotic affairs in which who is fighting whom and why is not always easy to ascertain (Kalyvas 2003). Viewing ISIS and the conflict in Syria and Iraq as a purely ideological conflict weakens our ability to effectively understand the current situation, and more importantly, to identify appropriate ways to arrest its escalation. In order to fully grasp the dynamics of the conflict in Iraq and Syria, it is necessary to try and formulate a better understanding of who is fighting in the conflict and why it is they fight. I argue that this conflict is less about Islam and Islamism than it is about sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shia in Iraq and Syria.

### **Shia/Sunni Strife and ISIS's Origins**

We can think of ISIS as having both an ideological origin and an organizational origin. Ideologically speaking, ISIS shares the same Islamist roots with other organizations like Al Qaeda and the Islamic Group. These stem back to the goal of

spreading Islam in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Muslim Brotherhood and the writings of Hassan Al Banna, as well as the puritanical 18<sup>th</sup> century Salafist ideology advocated by Abd al Wahhab. Most notably the modern Islamist ideology is indebted to the writings of Sayyid Qutub, who advocated an Islamist Vanguard similar to Lenin's Party State. Qutub's idea was that a return to Islam was needed in order to right the ills of the modern day Middle East, or even the broader Muslim World. This would involve the removal and destruction of secular state institutions in order to build a state and society based on Islam, the Quran, Hadith and Sharia law. In Qutub's view a violent, revolutionary Muslim organization was the best way to mobilize supporters and overthrow the secular and Western backed regimes in the Middle East. Over the last 30 years groups like Al Qaeda, Islamic Group and Islamic Jihad have all based their political orientations, espoused motives and goals oriented around Qutub's ideas (Sageman 2004). At the same time, groups like Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Islamic Group and Hamas have used Qutub's writings and message with the goal of mobilizing opponents to the regimes and rulers in their own states and territories, or what Sageman refers to as the jihad at home (Sageman 2004; Brown 2007). Al Qaeda, on the other hand, pioneered the global jihad and what Sageman refers to as the jihad abroad (2004) by advocating attacks on all infidels, particularly Americans at home and abroad. What we see then is that Qutub's writing and the Islamist ideology have been used to advocate jihad in distant lands, with the example of foreign fighters fighting in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, and again under the US occupation, while also being suited to the local and domestic political goals of groups like Hamas, who only engage in violence against Israel (Brown 2007). Though there are international aspects within the Islamist ideology, most Islamist groups have focused on the jihad at home and attempted to both overthrow the existing regimes and mobilize supporters within a clear domestic constituency.

Though ISIS shares the same ideological orientation as many Islamist groups, organizationally the group's origins come from Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), formed shortly after the 2003 US invasion. Though AQI shared the Al Qaeda brand, it and, later, ISIS do not appear to have placed much emphasis on the global jihad in the same way that Al Qaeda has done in the past. Namely, AQI's violence was always locally contained. Of course, it could be argued that AQI was focused on Iraq since there were US soldiers occupying the country. AQI's attacks on US soldiers could then be considered part of both the domestic and global jihad. Currently, ISIS may in fact have aspirations to take part in the global jihad, however, by looking at the organization's rise, its support and local actions, we can see that it is much more concerned with local sectarian fighting than it is with global jihad. Though ISIS has been implicated in carrying out attacks in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016, I believe that to reduce the organization's *raison d'être*, and more importantly its

individual members to fighting a Global Salafi Jihad is to mischaracterize the fundamental difference between ISIS and Al Qaeda. Moreover, such a viewpoint can distort our understanding of how ISIS has emerged, how it has mobilized its supporters, and who fights for ISIS.

In making my case it is important to note a key difference between Al Qaeda and AQI (later ISIS). Where Al Qaeda emphasized the jihad abroad, targeting namely American and European targets, the majority of ISIS attacks have taken place in Syria and Iraq, showing that it has decided to focus on the jihad at home (see Table 1). Al Qaeda, even before the US invasion of Afghanistan, never possessed or attempted to create its own state. Nor did the organization engage in a domestic insurgency designed to either overthrow an existing state or create its own. In Sudan and Afghanistan, Al Qaeda was hosted by each country's respective regime. Therefore we must understand that aside from its former links with the Al Qaeda brandname, ISIS is altogether a different kind of group with a different set of priorities, chief among them being the creation and governance of a state. As a result of this state building program, ISIS places a strong emphasis on sectarian violence, mainly between the two dominant denominations in Islam, Sunni and Shia. ISIS is attempting to create a pure Sunni state. In this sense, its brand of Islamism is akin to sectarian nationalism.

Looking at interval event data on ISIS attacks from 2011 to 2013 (2014 is not yet available) one sees that violence increased in Iraq a year after the US withdrew its forces in 2011; however, instead of it focusing on the US and coalition forces as the earlier violence had done, the main targets have been civilians with 200 attacks out of 419 occurring against civilians and private property in Iraq in 2013. Followed in descending frequency by attacks on police, businesses, military and other government targets (see Table 2). The emphasis on attacking private citizens and property supports the idea that this conflict is largely sectarian in nature. Based on media reports we can assume that the majority of these attacks have been on Iraq's Shia and dwindling Christian minority. Additionally, a breakdown of ISIS attacks across neighborhoods in Baghdad reveals that the group is more prone to launching attacks in Shia populated neighborhoods. Out of 171 attacks, 121 were carried out in Shia dominated neighborhoods (see Table 3).

What is more revealing is that in 2013 most of ISIS's actions occurred not in Syria, where the civil war has been ongoing since 2011, but in Iraq. Iraq saw 419 ISIS attacks in 2013, while Syria witnessed 25. What the data indicate is that ISIS is more an Iraqi phenomenon than one related to the Syrian conflict or even the Global Salafi Jihad. Even though the group's origins lie in AIQ, the reemergence of the organization is rooted in the Sunni-Shia politics of Iraq.

**Table 1.** AQI/ISIS Attacks in Iraq and Syria 2011-2013

	Iraq	Syria
<b>2011</b>	35	0
<b>2012</b>	303	0
<b>2013</b>	419	25
<b>TOTAL</b>	757	25

Source: Global Terrorism Database <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

**Table 2.** ISIS Attacks in Iraq and Syria 2013

	Iraq	Syria
<b>NGO</b>	0	3
<b>Other</b>	1	0
<b>Political Party</b>	1	0
<b>Journalist &amp; Media</b>	2	10
<b>Utilities</b>	2	0
<b>Educational Inst</b>	3	0
<b>Transportation</b>	3	0
<b>Terrorist/Non-State Militia</b>	5	0
<b>Unknown</b>	5	0
<b>Religious Figures/Inst</b>	9	1
<b>Government</b>	27	1
<b>Military</b>	31	4
<b>Business</b>	46	1
<b>Police</b>	84	0
<b>Private Citizens</b>	200	5
<b>Total</b>	419	25

Source: Global Terrorism Database <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

**Table 3.** ISIS Attacks by Neighborhood in Baghdad 2013

Neighborhood Demographics	Attacks
<b>Sunni</b>	20
<b>Unknown</b>	13
<b>Mixed</b>	17
<b>Shia</b>	121
<b>Total</b>	171

Source: Global Terrorism Database <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

After the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the minority Sunnis were removed from power. Since then, the majority Shia have largely been in control of the country's security forces and institutions. Over the last few years groups like Human Rights Watch have charged that former Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki's regime was engaged in a campaign of violence and harassment of Iraq's Sunnis. The documented abuses include extrajudicial killings, air strikes, and torture (Human Rights Watch 25 April 2013). This is not to suggest that ISIS's actions are justified by the actions of the Al-Maliki regime, rather it demonstrates that unlike Al Qaeda and ISIS's earlier incarnation AQI, which was anti-Western and part of the Global Salafi Jihad, the growth and support that ISIS has received in Iraq over 2012-2014 is in part due to the domestic political situation in Iraq. Moreover, focusing on the recent Sunni-Shia strife in Iraq adds further weight to the argument that the ongoing conflict is one that can best be described as a sectarian civil war. Based on this observation we can begin to better understand who fights for ISIS and why, by looking at what we know about other sectarian and ethnic civil wars.

### **Participation in Violent Conflict**

In the remainder of the paper I use the literature on domestic conflict to create a framework through which we can better understand ISIS and the dynamics of the conflict in Iraq and Syria.

I begin by first establishing that like any other dissident organization, ISIS has had to overcome its collective action problem. The collective action problem exists when individuals must act together in the pursuit of a public good. Given that once the public good is attained it is available to everyone, most people will prefer to free ride rather than actively participate in its acquisition (Olson 1965; Lichbach 1998). When it comes to forms of collective violence, the collective action problem is assumed to be even greater. Lichbach's five per cent rule offers that 95 per cent of the time, less than five per cent of a public good's supporters will actively engage in attaining it (Lichbach 1998). In order to understand participation and the dynamics of conflict, we need to determine how insurgents and insurgent leaders overcome their collective action problem.

Overcoming the collective action problem often requires that organizations and their leaders provide participants with some individual, selective incentive. Research has shown that ideology and grievances are usually insufficient in overcoming the insurgent collective action problem (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Taydas *et al.* 2011; Hoeffler 2011; Fearon and Laitin 2003). At a material level selective incentives often take the form of loot stripped from the battlefield, or salaries paid by the organization with the revenue made from battlefield loot (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Weinstein 2007). For example in the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina,

and Croatia, Serb paramilitary groups stripped almost everything of value from the villages under their control (Silber and Little 1996). Some of this loot went to the paramilitary leaders and members, while the rest went to Belgrade (Stewart 2008).

There is certainly a case to be made for the importance of material incentives in Iraq. Estimates put ISIS's revenue from smuggled oil to be at one million dollars a day. The organization's total assets were believed to total around two billion dollars in June 2014. The monthly salary for your average ISIS insurgent is said to be 400 dollars a month. Interestingly, according to the World Bank this amount is slightly lower than the average per capita income in Iraq. One should take into consideration that amid a blossoming civil war, especially in the war-affected areas, steady salaries may be harder to come by, making 400 dollars a month worth more in ISIS controlled areas than elsewhere in Iraq. Regardless of the regional value of this lower than average pay, the organization's ability to generate revenue and its vast supply of resources shows that there is a case to be made that the ISIS insurgency is in large part fueled by its ability to pay and effectively enrich some of its members.

However, given the history and level of sectarian strife in Iraq, and the sectarian nature of ISIS's involvement in the conflict, ISIS is likely able to use the violence itself as a means of recruitment and mobilization. As mentioned above, anti-Sunni violence in Iraq has been a growing concern since US forces withdrew. Since Sunni protests began in 2013 and ISIS's military advance over the summer of 2014, during which they took Mosul, Sunnis have become targets for government supported Shia militia. Some of these militia are accused of being little more than death squads. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, veteran Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn supports the earlier observations of HRW, stating that:

Because the army is performing no better than before, the main fighting forces facing Isis are the Shia militia. Highly criminalized, they are fighting hard around Baghdad to drive back Isis and cleanse mixed areas of Sunni population. Sunnis are often picked up at check points, held for ransoms of tens of thousands of dollars and usually murdered even when the money is paid. (Cockburn 2014: 10)

The Iraqi Government has strong ties with Shia militia groups. In fact some of their leaders are in the Government. Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Shia militia the al-Badr Brigades, is the current Iraqi Minister of Transport (as of 2014). A junior member of al-Badr was appointed as the Minister of the Interior after the US disapproved of al-Amiri's appointment. The inclusion of Shia militia leaders into the Government, as well as the state's reliance on these militias are likely to only increase support for ISIS, exacerbating the Shia-Sunni rift in Iraqi society.

Research of past conflicts shows that amid random violence aimed at civilians, it actually becomes safer to join the insurgency than it does to remain a bystander. Kalyvas and Kocher (2007) argue that in such cases participation becomes less

costly than not participating. The support and investment provided to members of the insurgent organization gives the insurgents better odds at surviving the conflict. Brutal counterinsurgency policies, coupled, in the case of Iraq, with sectarian violence, are actually more likely to harm non participants than participants. Kalyvas and Kocher (2007) use the case of the US' Phoenix Project in Viet Nam as a case study. They find that for every insurgent targeted by US and RVN (Republic of Viet Nam) forces, 38 innocent civilians were also targeted. The odds of survival actually improve for members of the insurgency. The reason being that insurgents are given the resources, training, and support by the insurgent organization to evade the suppression of the state and its allies. The War in Croatia also saw a positive relationship between Serb attacks on municipalities in Croatia and an increase in participation in Croatian armed forces. Thereby, providing empirical confirmation to Kalyvas and Kocher's hypothesis: violence fosters increased participation in conflict (Brown 2013).

Given the indiscriminate nature of the Shia militia attacks on Sunni civilians described by Cockburn and Human Rights Watch, it is logical that support for ISIS has grown as the organization is better able to defend or protect members of the Sunni community. In this sense, we should be mindful that support for ISIS among its members or its broader constituency is likely to be contingent on its ability to provide for the community in terms of safety for members and in other cases of governance (I explore this further on). Regarding ISIS's popularity and support as something that stems from the ideological commitment of extreme adherents to Islam is likely to be far too reductive to be useful in establishing a competent understanding of the conflict.

One example of the lack of ideological commitment is seen in an unlikely tactic: suicide bombing. One of ISIS's main tools in the conflict is the use of suicide bombing. While suicide bombing is often depicted as the most extreme act of religious devotion, the literature offers that suicide bombing is both a rational and tactical tool in asymmetrical war. Mia Bloom finds that ideological conflicts are less likely to feature suicide bombing (Bloom 2005). Ethnic and sectarian conflicts are more prone to suicide bombings as they serve to both further divide the community along sectarian lines, while also provoking reprisals within the community from which the suicide bombers come. Such actions in turn work to the advantage of the insurgent organization as heavy handed counterinsurgency tactics work to further outrage the targeted community, thereby fostering an environment where suicide bombings are a more acceptable form of violent retribution.

The situation in Iraq and Syria reveals what many other conflicts have also shown: the more the state or state-related allies fight an insurgency, the more support for that insurgency can grow. The sectarian dimensions of the conflict in Iraq



and Syria, both those perpetrated by ISIS and state-backed Shia militia, have led to its escalation and continuation, reinforcing the support for its belligerents, and likely causing many individuals to join them.

### **Governance**

In addition to the consequences violence has on community support for insurgent organizations and the use of suicide terrorism, insurgents can also foster support by providing stability for communities under their control. As civil wars are the worst kind of domestic conflict, stability is often hard to come by. In the absence of state power, the vacuum caused by the conflict is filled with multiple parties. This situation can lead to what Mancur Olson referred to as roving bandits (1982). Roving bandits are the worst situation for individuals and society. In the conditions of a Hobbesian state of anarchy created by an ongoing conflict, roving bandits, such as militia, soldiers, and paramilitary groups from all sides of the conflict prey on the populace, looting and excising rents (not to mention killing) without providing any of the former public goods that the state once offered, namely security, services and the enforcement of contracts. Since different bandits come and go, each with their own demands, rules, and orders, regular citizens are left with nothing but uncertainty about the future and the next batch of bandits' demands. Under these conditions, the arrival of a stationary bandit is often met with open or at least tacit approval. The stationary bandit seeks to collect revenue from the populace, but also to defend against other bandits.

In the chaos of Syria's conflict, ISIS has become the stationary bandit. The areas under its control have returned to some level of stability. Though ISIS enacts harsh reprisals for theft, blasphemy, and collaborating with its enemies, it also provides the semblances of a bureaucratic state. In Raqqa, ISIS's Syrian headquarters, the organization has built a new market, installed new power lines, initiated public transport and fixed potholes on the streets. ISIS has orphanages where children and parents displaced by the conflict are often reunited. They even organize fairs for children, complete with ice cream and inflatable slides. They also run soup kitchens, offer health services, including vaccination programs against polio (Zelin 2014).

These efforts of state building and governance, though far removed from what most of the population may actually want, do provide stability in a chaotic environment. They also provide ISIS with a community that is more willing to support them, making the insurgent organization's job of mobilizing, recruiting and arming its insurgents, as well as developing a market and economy capable of financing the leadership and insurgency, possible. In short, good governance can help insurgent organizations more easily solve their collective action problem.

## Leaders

Though it is useful to look at what might drive members of the general populace to support an insurgent group, it is also productive to look at the incentives leaders have in mobilizing members and pursuing insurgency. First, we see that most leaders come from a social and educational background that is higher than their followers (Francisco 2010). Moreover, insurgency without leadership is next to impossible. Leaders are instrumental in deploying solutions to the collective action problem. The invisible hand of revolution does not exist, it requires leaders to organize, provide incentives, acquire and distribute resources (Lichbach 1998; Francisco 2010).

Insurgent leaders throughout history have gained an international reputation, gone from terrorist to statesman, using their position as a revolutionary to become the leader of a country or political movement, and profited immensely from the struggle that they in many ways caused. Lenin, Castro, and Gerry Adams from the IRA are just a few examples. Insurgent and revolutionary leaders often receive the largest selective incentive from the conflict and one that is similar to other politicians the world over, profit and power. No doubt, becoming an insurgent leader is a life changing event. One that often takes these individuals from obscurity to the world stage.

The leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, fits in with the company of past insurgent leaders. He has a PhD in Islamic studies, and went from a quiet, unassuming man living in a small apartment in Baghdad, to being the self-declared leader of all Muslims worldwide. He also now controls an organization with billions of dollars in assets and an income of around one million dollars a day. While his religious zeal may be what motivates him, we can also be certain that the money, importance, and power have their perks as well.

## Discussion and Conclusion

ISIS and the conflict in Iraq and Syria reveal how problematic and persistent civil wars can be. The sectarian nature of ISIS's militancy, as revealed by the event data, also demonstrates that the war in Iraq and Syria is likely not to be part of the Global Salafi Jihad, nor are its participants necessarily ideological or religious zealots. Rather, the conflict is spurred on by its own violence and the ability of ISIS to use the chaos caused by the fighting to its own advantage. We see that through its acquisition of territory, loot, and resources ISIS is able to adequately compensate its members materially. Past conflicts reveal that as random and indiscriminate violence increases, so too does participation within the insurgent organization (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007; Brown 2013). We also see that bringing some form of stable governance to areas once racked with instability is a way for insurgent groups to gain tacit support from the community. All of which have contributed to the rise of ISIS. Most importantly, the above observations better explain the fighting in Iraq and Syria, ISIS's effective-

ness, and the organization's support among the community than assuming all of the above depends on the religious dedication of its members to wage jihad.

In the world of domestic conflict, sadly, this is nothing new (Lichbach 1998; Kalyvas 2003; Weinstein 2007; Francisco 2010). Moreover, the organization's leaders and their self-interest give them little incentive to stop the fighting. ISIS is organized, profitable, and so far leading an effective insurgency against Shia regimes in Iraq and Syria.

The question then becomes what means will actually help degrade and destroy ISIS? Unfortunately there is no easy answer. As the literature and evidence suggest, military force is unlikely to be a winning solution. While the options for a political resolution have long been exhausted by the chaos of the US invasion of Iraq, the civil war in Syria, and the destructive sectarian policies of Iraq's Shia majority government.

By seeing the origins of ISIS's support in the context of the domestic Shia-Sunni strife, rather than as purely a result of ideological commitment, policy-makers could begin to attempt to foster the creation of power sharing institutions within Iraq and Syria. Such a plan could offer a more promising future to Shia and Sunni alike, or at least one that is more promising than years of endless violence. The second option would be some form of sectarian partitioning; however, this would likely cause further bloodshed and need to include the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Any effective solution is likely to require the full support of the international community. Unfortunately the geopolitical divisions within the region, such as Russia's support for Iran and Syria, and the US's opposition to Iran and Russia, as well its support for the Sunni Gulf States and Turkey, minimizes the likelihood of the international community bringing forth the effort and resources such an endeavor would require.

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## Data

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