

Critical study of Emergence and Consolidation of the Islamic State and the role of Dabiq

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Abstract

The rise of the Islamic State in 2014 came as a surprise to most of the world. Through announcing the Caliphate, the Islamic State showed itself as the leader of the global jihadist movement. Though their rise seems rapid but they have a history and propaganda mechanism that need to be understood in order to understand them and their ideology. The Islamic State is seen as one the most brutal jihadi organizations that thrives on the sectarian conflict in the region and uses force to control people. However, the group has been able to gather attention of the people and has been able to recruit people not just from the Middle East but from

around the world. They have used theological justifications for their brutal actions. To curb the group is a challenge that the global community faces. This paper discusses the origin of the group to understand its standing today and propaganda. It then looks at their ideological root that is which strand of Islam it follows and how it interprets religion. In the end it looks in to the response that the Islamic State received from within its domain and the world and how the group can be defeated.

Keywords: Islamic State, ISIS propaganda, jihadi, ideology, dabiq

Introduction

The Clarion Project (2014) in its fact sheet about ISIS, states that ISIS is a political and military organization that follows the extremist version of Islam as a political philosophy. ISIS aims to spread its ideas all over and pushes for people to join their so-called cause of establishing an Islamic state based on Islamic sharia, following the actual and true teachings of Quran and hadith. The Fact Sheet states that the groups self-interpret and follows the Salafist-Jihadism ideology. For them, there is no distinction between the religion and state and that the state should be run using the sharia or Islamic law and by strictly following and adhering to the Quran and hadith. Alastair Crooke believes that ISIS couldn't be understood without understanding the history and ideology of Wahhabism. According to Clarion Project's factsheet,

Wahhabism and Salafism are closely related and in fact Wahhabism is a subdivision of Salafism and both the factions influenced by and deduce from the writings and thought of Ibn Taymiyya, the Islamist jurist from 14th century. ISIS also draws from the ideas of Sayyid Qutb, the Muslim Brotherhood ideologue who stressed upon the idea that all matters should be strictly based on sharia laws.

Fishman sees the rise of Islamic State not as a sudden happening (Fishman, 2014). He goes on to define how the group split from Al-Qaeda in Iraq 2006 and declared itself as a Caliphate and formed the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). When the world thought that they were not that important and not so strong, they were still very active. According to Fishman, ISI settled in Iraq and created tensions and carried out terrorist attacks throughout the country. They had been constantly infiltrating Syria with fighters and were already present there when the uprising against Bashar al-Assad began in 2011 (Fishman, 2014). ISI created Jabhat al-Nusrah in Syria. The group split in 2013 and in 2014 ISI declared the establishment of an Islamic State and Caliphate after capturing Mosul.

Contrary to what Fishman says Ghannoushi (2014) believes that the rise of ISIS was sudden and it was because of the geopolitics of the region where a political vacuum was created after the U.S. retreated its influence from the region. Consequently, in Iraq, that gap was filled by the radical Islamist groups and the already existing sectarian grievances helped to promote it. Chomsky (2014) seconds Ghannousi's opinion saying that ISIS is a result of U.S.A's foreign policy which has led to a rise in sectarian conflict that has wrecked Iraq and had adverse consequences in the region.

Ghannoushi (2014) stresses that, it isn't just the political gap that has contributed to the rise of ISIS but it is also because of the demographics of the region. The very complex demography produced the discourse of different jihadist groups. The region has a very complex demography because of the different ethnic and religious identities that exist. Such as Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, Persian Shias etc.

Bifercation of Al-Qaida and ISIS

As identified by Fishman (2014), the group separated from Al-Qaeda because of three reasons Al-Qaeda gives first priority to attacking the West and throwing them out of the region whereas, ISIS prioritizes establishing a Caliphate in the region. Secondly, their views regarding *takfirism* (the act of declaring other Muslims as infidels) differ greatly. And third, ISIS declared caliphate for all Muslims and Al-Qaeda hasn't accepted it yet (Fishman, 2014). On the other hand, Bennett and Reyes (2014) pointed out that many other Sunni militant jihadist groups/organizations across Asia have sought alliance with ISIS and have showed their support for the cause of ISIS.

Soumaya Ghannoushi (2014) contends that the Sykes-Picot Agreement that created the borders in the Middle East, by the British and Frenchmen, were unjust to the region and never been confronted so well until now, when the ISIS overtook territories in Syria and Iraq and claimed to have ended the demarcation between the two states. What makes ISIS different from other groups is how it rose to power so suddenly and has been able to capture large territories so quickly. The group has managed to get widespread attention because of how it threatens the very existence of many states in the region, how it has redefined political geography and because of it, countries like Iran, Qatar and U.S. and other

countries, some of which are enemies, have collaborated to defeat it (Ghannoushi, 2014). Noam Chomsky (2014) whereas disagrees with the statement, stating that Iran along with Syria have been kept out of the U.S. led coalition and that only includes few of the Arab states that have supported many jihadist organizations themselves.

Saudi stance over ISIS

Saudi Arabia now supports the fight against ISIS and is a part of the U.S. led coalition but, according to Chomsky, Saudi Arabia has been funding ISIS for a very long time and also provides for its ideology. He further says that ISIS follows the extremist jihadi doctrine of Salafism/Wahabism which are both missionary and extremist interpretations of Islam. ISIS has used Saudi resources for spreading its message across the Muslim world (Chomsky, 2014).

Aims of ISIS

Stating the aims of ISIS, Zelin writes that ISIS aims to conquer the areas that were once a part of the Muslim Caliphate like Greece and Spain, with the ultimate aim of world domination (Zelin, 2014). The goal of what Zelin calls the colonial “Caliphate project”, is to overthrow the Westphalian state system and end the American dominance. Zelin believes that ISIS, because of its foreign fighters, can spread its domination in the world. Talking about their strength, Zelin states that they have a strong ideological and narrative allure and he sees their economic independence as their biggest strength (Zelin, 2014). Saudi Arabia, just like Israel, is a major target for ISIS which they want to occupy and overthrow the regime. According to Zelin, ISSI believes that if it wins Palestinians, it will ultimately win the entire Muslim world. The

ISIS also wants the West to stay within its own homeland rather than interfering in the matters of security of the Arab world and this could be achieved by carrying out terrorist attacks in the West (Zelin, 2014).

When looking at the targets of ISIS and Al-Qaeda, the targets are the same but the order in which both the organizations plan to carry out their aims, is different. According to Michael Scheuer (2011), for Al-Qaeda on the top of the list is the West (especially U.S.), then Israel and other oppressive Muslim regimes and at the end are the Shias. But Zelin (2014) points out that ISIS has got it the other way around. Their first target is the Shiites, then the Saudi regime and lastly the West whom the ISIS refers to as the “Crusaders”.

Support to ISIS from youth and the role of Dabiq

Elliott Abrams (2014) talks about the support and support that ISIS is getting and its ideological appeal to the young Muslim. How the world sees ISIS is different but how these young people attracted to its ideology see it, is another different paradigm. Abrams identifies and states different reasons that attract people. They largely believe that ISIS’ brutal actions are a result of the Western government and its policies. For these people, ISIS is an opportunity for the establishment of a true Islamic state based on shariah, on Islamic values, on justice and faith, without the interference of the Western world, where their identities wouldn’t be lost and they would be able to live in a just and fair society. On the other hand, Abrams argues, that there are many who went with the idea of joining ISIS but have returned disappointed because of the way that ISIS conducts things.

In July, ISIS started circulation of its series of digital magazine called Dabiq. The magazine is published in five languages, English, Arabic, French, Russian and German. Gambhir (2014) stated that ISIS explains its grand strategy through its publication Dabiq. It talks about the groups religious, military and political programs.

ISIS in the first issue of Dabiq illustrates upon the importance of immah that is leadership (Dabiq, 2014). And they view political and religious leadership equally and certify this claim using hadith and verses and the Quran. As stated in Dabiq, it is the duty of Muslims to follow the imam and help him implement the Islamic law. According to ISIS, people have forgotten the concept of millah and they take it up upon themselves to revive this so that they would return to the path of truth (Dabiq, 2014). They also blame secularism for separating religion and state whereas, as stated in Dabiq, both are inseparable and the state should be run using the Quran as a book for governance. Also, the IS claims that it is the true and “unquestionable immah” since it has carried out the command of Allah to its best possible ability (Dabiq, 2014).

In the second issue of Dabiq, ISIS has called people to show allegiance to the Islamic State because those who don't are infidels and therefore should be killed. It also states that there isn't any free choice in the religion, there is only the strict laws as laid down by Allah and people have no choice in that matter. To illustrate this, they give the example of the Prophet Noah and how when free choice was given priority, they were punished by the flood since they didn't follow the path of God. They believe that the flood was a clear sign of the fallacy of giving choice between truth and deception. The magazine also highlights the major ISIS accomplishment during the month and like the first issue, also

includes an article written by Western scholar or the “Crusader” as the IS calls them.

Throughout the next two issues, ISIS highlights the attempts of the Western world, the Crusaders, to destroy the Islamic State. It also shows how ISIS has established a successful system in the territories that it now controls. It provides people with the basic necessities, like food, shelter, medical care, electricity, etc. Throughout the publications, ISIS also includes visuals and texts about the executions that it carries out. It also justifies carrying out the religious duties through Quran and hadith such as running the affairs of the state and fulfilling the duties that the state has towards its citizens and it also gives justifications for executions and blowing up shrines. Through the magazine ISIS also states its accomplishments and goals. For example, one of their goal being, as said by one of the Jihadi, “We’ll conquer your Rome.” (Dabiq, The Failed Crusade, 2014).

History of the Islamic State

The Zarqawi Era (1999-2006)

The Islamic State is not a group that emerged recently but has its roots in Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s release from prison in Jordan in 1999 (Lister, 2014). Following his release, Zarqawi moved to Afghanistan where after contacting the leadership of Al-Qaeda and acquiring their permission and a loan from them, he set up a training camp in Herat to train militants. It was here that he formed his militant group Jama‘at al-Tawhid wa’al-Jihad (JTWJ) (Lister, 2014). Zarqawi did not work with al-Qaeda anytime during the period that he was in Afghanistan. Bin Laden and Zarqawi followed different ideologies and Zarqawi had a stricter stance towards his (Bunzel, 2015). Zarqawi’s JTWJ went underground

after its plan to attack Radisson Hotel in Amman was brought to surface by the Jordan's intelligence but it came out after then U.S invasion of Afghanistan (Lister, 2014). Zarqawi's group moved to northern Iraq in the Kurdish area and started recruiting Iraqis (Mapping Militants, 2015).

JTWJ soon became an important faction in Iraq that worked towards pushing U.S. forces out of Iraq and created an insurgency in the country. JTWJ had more different goals than other groups and its target was not just the coalition forces in Iraq; this became apparent when the group carried out three suicide attacks for the first time in August 2003 (Lister, 2014). Zarqawi's main target was the Shi'ite community. His intention was to start a sectarian conflict in the country, a civil war. Zarqawi had a very strong anti-Shia stance and his writings were predominantly focused on anti-Shia rhetoric (Lister, 2014) in both political and religious terms. His stance remains a part of the Islamic State today (Bunzel, 2015). He relied heavily on Ibn Taymiyya and other Sunni ideologues to support his arguments that decried followers of Shi'te doctrine as heretics, apostates, sinister and are the enemies of Islam (Bunzel, 2015). He talked about the complete annihilation of the Shias and went on to argue that the Shia wanted to create a regional hegemony across the Middle East. For Zarqawi, the Americans were the enemy but the Shia were the greatest threat and the most dangerous and destructive enemies of the Sunnis and hence should be killed (Bunzel, 2015). While al-Qaeda did not target the Shias and did not consider them as the immediate enemy, since they focused on targeting the U.S. forces first (the far enemy), Zarqawi's primary target was the Shi'ite community (Scheuer, 2011). He was criticized for his stance by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Zarqawi's former teacher and Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second-in-command (Bunzel, 2015).

In September 2004, Zarqawi pledged loyalty to bin Laden and was named the chief of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Scheuer, 2011). From this point, JTJW became AQI. The U.S. invasion of Iraq caused further tensions and tore apart the Iraqi society, which was already suffering because of the wars and sanctions. The power vacuum created because of the invasion and the resistance to that occupation, allowed the AQI to easily infiltrate the gap (Gerges, 2015).

However, Zarqawi had tense relations with al-Qaeda on account of the ruthless targeting of Shi'ite community; as well as AQI's adherence to the takfeeri model that allowed for the killing of both non-combatant Sunnis and Shias. It further created a platform for the widespread brutality that they carried out from bombing mosques and killing civilians, tribal chiefs, religious leaders and mass beheading of their captives (Scheuer, 2011). Zarqawi believed in rapid cleansing of the society using violence as the means whereas al-Qaeda focused on targeting the apostate regimes and the far enemy.

It was in 2005 when al-Qaeda leaders Ayman al-Zawahiri and Atiya Abd al-Rahman al-Libi wrote letters to Zarqawi, and Zawahiri pointed towards establishing an Islamic state in Iraq and Zarqawi too had the same strategy in mind. In January 2006, the time when AQI's popularity was declining in Iraq, AQI formed a coalition with five other Iraq-based jihadist groups and formed Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM) (Lister, 2014). In April of 2006, Zarqawi gave out the message that the MSM was a step towards the establishment of an Islamic state (Bunzel, 2015). Zarqawi, however, was killed in a U.S. led airstrike on June 7, 2006.

Establishing the Islamic State in Iraq (2006-2013)

With Zarqawi's death, the mission did not end. Abu Ayyub al-Masri became AQI's new leader and a few months later the establishment of Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) was announced with Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its leader (Lister, 2014). With the Islamic State the ISI envisioned a widespread support from the Muslims but it failed to do so. It continued with the same "absolutist ideology" (Lister, 2014) of AQI and the brutality hence, was not able to gain support from the Sunni communities even within Iraq. Though initially AQI did get huge support because of the Sunni anger towards the Shia and the U.S. and its coalition forces but with ISI it wasn't the case. It also failed to gather support from other jihadist and the Salafi scholars, with a few scholars even criticizing the establishment of the Islamic State (Bunzel, 2015).

ISI faced further complications when in 2007 the *Sahwa* (awakening) movement started. Formed by Iraq's tribe and backed up by the local forces and U.S., the movement worked against the insurgency (Lister, 2014). The ISI was targeted and the counter-insurgency strategy proved to be successful and ISI suffered greatly from the end of 2007. In 2008, ISI moved its headquarter to Mosul which helped the re-centralization of the ISI leadership (Lister, 2014).

The Sahwa movement posed a threat to ISI and its survival but the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq from 2009-2010 weakened the movement. The Sahwa members started having problems with Nouri al-Maliki's government because of the unpaid wages and the lack of support. ISI however, cashed this moment and started recruiting Sahwa members by offering them higher wages (Lister, 2014). By early 2010, 36 out of the 42 senior leaders of ISI were

either killed or captured which was a blow to the group (Mapping Militants, 2015). On April 18, 2010, Baghdadi and Masri were killed in U.S-Iraqi joint raid and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was then made the leader of ISI (Lister, 2014), who continues to lead the Islamic State (IS) today.

Though ISI had a setback because of the Sahwa movement but odds went in their way because of the political situation in Iraq where Nouri al-Maliki's government's policies resulted in the marginalization of the Sunni community in Iraq (Gerges, 2015). Baghdadi here positioned his organization ISI as the leader of the Sunnis of Iraq against the Shia government. ISI used Sunnis' grievances as a means to act as their vanguard (Gerges, 2014). At this point ISI recruited officers from Saddam Hussein's banned army and the Republican guard who helped ISI in the professional military training (Gerges, 2015).

What paved way for the revival and expansion of ISI, was the Syrian Civil War that started in 2011. Baghdadi sent Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani, the Ninawa operations chief, to Syria in order to create an ISI front that resulted in the creation of Jabhat al-Nusra.

On the other hand, ISI kept expanding and carrying out operations in Iraq. It started "Breaking the Walls" campaign in 2012 in order to free the imprisoned members of the group from Iraqi prisons (Lister, 2014). With an attack on Tikrit's Tasfirat Prison in September 2012, ISI was able to liberate 47 of its leaders and later with the attack on Abu Ghraib prison in July 2013; they freed around 500 prisoners (Lister, 2014). The second important operation was Operation Soldier's Harvest that started in July 2013 and targeted Iraqi security forces.

It was not just Iraq but Syria as well where ISI expanded its operations. It used Syria's civil war as a means to strengthen and expand the group further. With Jowlani already in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra carried out operations but Jowlani rejected any connection to ISI or al-Qaeda (Lister, 2014). Jabhat al-Nusra became a strong insurgent group in Syria and expanded in various parts of the country and was also able to seize military facilities in Syria.

Extending the Islamic State and the Tensions Within (2013-2014)

Baghdadi announced in 2013 that Jabhat al-Nusra was a part of the ISI working in Syria and from that point the two groups merged and renamed it to Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) (Mapping Militants, 2015). Jowlani and al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri rejected this statement and the merger, and Jowlani pledged allegiance to Zawahiri. This however did not stop ISIS from entering Syria and forming a force there, largely composed of fighters from al-Nusra who joined ISIS. This created tensions between the jihadist factions and Zawahiri told ISIS to limit its operations to Iraq only which Baghdadi rejected. A number of clashes took place between ISIS and other jihadi groups, most importantly al-Nusra which killed many of the fighters on both sides (Gerges, 2015).

ISIS continued to grow and expand its territory and carried out military operations in both Iraq and Syria. It carried out attacks against the government, the tribal groups in Iraq, different rebel groups in Syria and the Kurdish Peshmerga (Mapping Militants, 2015). In July 2013, ISIS killed Free Syrian Army senior commander. Later in January 2014, a coalition of other groups in

Syria launched operations against ISIS which forced it towards Raqqa. Because of its consistent refusal to mediate with other groups and to continue fighting for power, Zawahiri announced in February that ISIS is not a branch of al-Qaeda and it has no connection or relation with al-Qaeda whatsoever (Lister, 2014).

ISIS made its capital in Raqqa and on the other hand, in Iraq, in January 2014, it captured Fallujah and some parts of Ramadi. It continued expansion in Anbar and along the Syrian border. The operations in both Iraq and Syria were inter-connected and there was a continuous flow of weapons, funds, and fighters across the border (Lister, 2014). In June ISIS seized Mosul which also led to a wider Sunni uprising in Iraq (Lister, 2014).

The Caliphate Established

June 29, 2014, marked an important day when ISIS announced the establishment of a caliphate with Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi as the Caliph and changed its name to Islamic State (IS) (Mapping Militants, 2015). Abu-Muhammad al-Adnani, the spokesman for ISIS, announced that the Islamic State sovereignty extended to the entire world and was not just limited to Iraq and Syria, hence, the change in name (Lister, 2014). Since the declaration the self-proclaimed caliph Baghdadi has acted as the leader of the world and his followers have reciprocated his claims by following any of his brutal orders.

Conclusion:

The world has seen many leaders in history who have taken over some part of the world and declared themselves as the supreme commanders of the lands and in few cases of the world. One thing is common amongst them that all of them depended heavily on

various kinds of propaganda to spread their message across the masses. Hitler in the middle of the twentieth century is the perfect example of it. Later in the recent past we witnessed emergence Al-Qaida which was not much popular because it lacked proper propaganda machinery. In recent times ISIS being the most violent organization in the history has been able to gather support from many parts of the world, especially amongst the youth. They have been able to accomplish it through reaching out people and spreading their message through various means of mass communication such a websites, social media and magazines. Dabiq in these terms is a very successful means of their recruitment. We have seen poster boys like Jihadi Jhon portrayed as heroes for the organization. Unfortunately, the organization played their cards so well that they were able to attract young women, in their teens and twenties. These women are called jihadi brides. The threat ISIS has posed to the world in general and the Muslim world in particular is very serious. It needs to be tackled properly to eliminate it. In today's world media war should be reciprocated through media to minimize the damage and to counter the main threat on the ground later.

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