

Case Study: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

Introduction

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a transnational insurgency that has established itself across the borders of Syria and Iraq and established franchises in Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen, amongst others. It has also inspired major terrorist attacks in many countries, including France, Turkey and the United States. ISIS is also known as the Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS) and Daesh, an acronym from Arabic. The leadership of ISIS has declared itself as a Sunni Islamic caliphate, so claiming to represent all Muslims, but is driven by extremist interpretations of Islam. Its base is across predominantly Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria and it enforces its own strict interpretation of Sharia law, rejecting all innovations of Islam since its early days. Here our focus is on ISIS within Iraq and Syria, which is the home of the insurgency.

Origins

The emergence of ISIS is an outcome of the occupation of Iraq by a United States coalition from 2003-2011 and the policies of the Shia dominated Iraqi government that had succeeded the deposed regime of Saddam Hussein. The 2003 invasion was a rapid success, but was followed by a mismanaged occupation in which the Ba'athist dominated government and military were disestablished. Hussein's rule had benefited Iraq's Sunni's at the expense of the two other major population groups, the Shia and the Kurds, and any dissent had been comprehensively crushed. With Saddam gone, and the numbers of coalition troops insufficient to provide security, a Sunni-Shia civil war broke out and a Sunni insurgency began against coalition forces. The present day ISIS has its origins in these events and at one point was allied to Al Qaeda as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The relationship between Al Qaeda central and AQI was fraught due to AQI's refusal to listen to the Al Qaeda leadership and their bloodthirsty methods, which included beheadings and the bombing of Shia mosques. AQI had strongholds in western Iraq's Anbar province in cooperation with Sunni tribes, but this relationship broke down due to AQI's methods and goals, and AQI's influence was severely diminished by an alliance of tribal leaders and Iraqi and US forces. Despite this AQI declared itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2007 but did not actually hold any territory. The ISI launched a campaign of assassination against Sunni tribal leaders prior to the withdrawal of US troops in 2011. The Iraqi government continued to favour Shia's over Sunni's, undermining their previous gains and the Sunni tribes in the region. The current leadership of ISIS is dominated by former Ba'athists who had been disenfranchised after the occupation of Iraq. Additional factors in the rise of ISIS was the willingness of Syria's Assad regime to allow foreign volunteers to cross Syrian territory into Iraq and support from within Saudi Arabia for Sunni groups in Iraq. This was due to regional political goals and both nations have since fought ISIS.

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Escalation

In 2011 protests in Syria over the arrests of teenage boys spraying anti-regime graffiti (one of which was mutilated and killed) were put down in a crackdown by the Syrian regime. Syria's descent into civil war had begun and would come to have much wider consequences. ISI took advantage of the war, establishing an offshoot group Jabhat al-Nusra, which began a terrorist campaign that by 2012 had developed into an insurgency capable of taking Syrian military bases. The ISI leadership then attempted to rein their offshoot in, declaring it part of the newly declared Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) in 2013, but it remained independent. ISIS then established its own forces in Syria, recruiting foreign fighters from its former proxy, and expanded aggressively across northern Syria while holding the city of Raqqa. It came into conflict with moderate opposition groups and lost territory in northern Syria before retaking territory in eastern Syria. These events occurred in the complex battleground of the civil war in Syria, but it was events in Iraq that would bring ISIS to global attention. The ISI had regrouped, reorganised its leadership and was bombing multiple targets in Iraq. Moreover, in 2012-13 it was attacking prisons, liberating imprisoned members and new recruits, and in 2013-14 launched a campaign of assassination and intimidation of Iraqi security personnel. This was accompanied by the infiltration of towns and cities, allowing cells to be formed, and an accomplished use of social media that ensured an influx of foreign recruits for indoctrination and training. In 2014 the caliphate was declared and ISIS rebranded itself as the Islamic State. Having consolidated its position in the Syrian city of Raqqa, ISIS exploited the situation in Iraq and took the Iraqi cities of Fallujah and Ramadi (lost by ISIS but retaken in 2015). They then took the northern city of Mosul and became a threat to Irbil, took Tikrit, and also became a threat to Baghdad. They continued to expand their presence in northern Iraq and Syria, seizing Sinjar in Iraq and fighting over the control of Kobani in 2015. The ISIS advance was stopped by the Kurds, backed by US airpower in the north of Syria and Iraq, and by Iranian backed Shia militias around Baghdad. The Iraqi army has since regrouped and after a sustained effort the city of Ramadi was retaken at the end of 2015. In Syria, ISIS was also pushed back from Kobane and an advance begun south towards Raqqa. In 2016 the Kurd's and Iraqi military began the fight to retake Mosul. From 2015 onwards the ground campaigns against ISIS have been supported by airpower from the US led coalition and ISIS positions have been targeted across Syria and Iraq, degrading the ability of ISIS to launch conventional attacks.

The above is a short summary of the ISIS insurgency between 2011 and 2016, and consequently a large amount of detail has been left out. ISIS has not had everything its own way, yet managed to gain control of an area the size of the United Kingdom across Syria and Iraq. It did this by exploiting instability in both of these countries and employing subversion, terrorist tactics, guerrilla warfare in the form of assassination and infiltration, gaining territory, thus becoming an insurgency and, at times, employing conventional warfare using massed forces and military equipment captured from the Syrian and Iraqi militaries. Moreover, its capture of oil facilities and ability to collect taxes within its area of control has meant that it has the economic resources to act as a proto-state that has all but eliminated the border between Syria and Iraq. It is not recognised as a state by any country, nor is its

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claim to be a caliphate recognised by the global Islamic community, which has looked on in horror.

ISIS has succeeded by fighting in the complex arena of the Syrian Civil War, where its opponents have largely been engaged in a life or death struggle between the regime and a myriad opposition, and in Iraq, a country destabilised by the actions of its own government with an army highly trained by the US, which proved to be inadequate due to corruption, poor leadership and manned by soldiers who had no personal interest in defending Sunni areas. ISIS advances were ultimately stopped in Iraq when they threatened Shia and Kurdish areas, where the defenders identified with the people and territory they were fighting over. In Syria, the advance north has been stalled when ISIS became a threat to the rival Syrian Turkmen and Kurds.

Third Parties

The military successes of ISIS has provoked a response from a large number of state and non-state actors, all of which have differing agendas and goals, but have common cause in defeating ISIS as both an organisation and a territorial identity. A coalition of Western and Middle-Eastern states have launched airstrikes against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, Russia has struck ISIS in Syria, and Iran has bombed ISIS in Iraq. In Syria ISIS has been combated on land by the Syrian army, opposition groups fighting the Syrian government, Islamist groups, the Turkmen and Kurds of northern Syria, and the Turkish army. In Iraq ISIS has been combated by the Iraqi army, Shia militias, Iranian sponsored militias and Kurdish *peshmerga*.

Mediation and Negotiation

The central ideology of the Islamic State does not recognise any other authority than the leadership of its self declared caliphate and this prohibits mediation and negotiation with its opponents. This includes representatives of Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, recognised scholars of Islam and the leadership of Al Qaeda. The ISIS worldview is apocalyptic, anticipating a final confrontation that will bring about the God's rule on Earth, and so invites confrontation as opposed to avoiding it.

Resolution

Prospects for a peaceful resolution of the Islamic State's confrontation with anyone who opposes them are low to the point of non-existence and it is very likely that the Islamic State will exist, if in a reduced form, for many years to come. There is potential, however, for individual disengagement from the organisation due to disenchantment with the reality of being a member of ISIS. It is also the case that groups that have declared affiliation to ISIS for political, social or military reasons (as is the case in Iraq's Anbar province) will break away. The key to enabling this in Iraq is political reform to reengage Sunni-Muslim communities and the provision of security. In Syria, this is not possible while a civil war is in

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progress. As it stands, the primary means by which a resolution to what is a complex conflict is being sought is through military force.

Workshop Questions

1. Apply one or more of the theories presented in the CAR Theories section: What do they reveal about the conflict and which are more appropriate to understanding the case?
2. Is it correct that ISIS is unlikely to negotiate? Who are the potential mediators, if any?
3. Is the success of ISIS a result of the power vacuum and instability created by the US led occupation, or are the actions of the Iraqi government more to blame?

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