1. The Unfolding Legacy of al-Qa‘ida in Iraq: From al-Zarqawi to the New Islamic Caliphate*

Andrea Plebani (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore)

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Whether Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi will succeed or not in creating a Caliphate able to extend its hold over the whole Islamic community and beyond, 2014 will be remembered as a defining moment for the broader radical Islamist galaxy. Only three years ago, officials and analysts alike scrambled to celebrate the requiem of al-Qa‘ida and of the brand of global jihad it embodied. The flames of its struggle had apparently been exhausted by US-led counterterrorism efforts as well as by the successes the movements of “Political Islam” were obtaining at the ballot boxes after the Arab Spring, ousting the same apostate regimes al-Qa‘ida (AQ) had tried in vain to topple in decades of 'honoured career'. And yet, all of a sudden, the world was awakened last June by the news that the insurgents fighting under the black flag of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) had conquered Mosul, the second biggest city in Iraq. In the midst of the indifference that had shrouded Iraq since the withdrawal of US troops in 2011 and of the convolutions of the Syrian war, the forces commanded by al-Baghdadi succeeded in recovering and in infiltrating an area stretching from north-western Syria to eastern Iraq and – even more important – in laying the foundations of a state located in the very heart of the Arab and the Islamic word. An objective that not even Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Baghdadi’s mentor and founder of al-Qa‘ida in Iraq (AQI), could have dreamt of and that until a couple of years ago would have appeared impossible even to his staunchest supporter. A state
that these black warriors seek to transform into a model for the whole ummah and into a launching pad for a global struggle aimed at reuniting the Islamic community and at restoring the golden age of Islam. No matter how much suffering they will inflict and how many innocent victims they will slaughter, nor if the overwhelming majority of the Islamic community rejects their battle, is horrified by their methods and accuses them of having followed in kharijites’s footsteps. Whether we like it or not, Daesh forces have deeply altered the frail equilibriums of the Middle Eastern region, challenging the very existence of the nation states that emerged from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and spreading a legacy of hatred and instability destined to affect the whole area for years, if not for decades to come. They also have the potential to extend their threat to the West as well, Europe in primis, thanks in part to the significant number of foreign fighters who have left our continent to join their ranks.

But how is possible that a movement that in 2010 was considered in its death throes succeeded a few years later to emerge as a key player in Syria and Iraq and to openly challenge the predominance of al-Qa’ida over the radical Islamic galaxy? Who are these extremists who terrorize entire provinces and what are their ideological bases? And – even more important – is their hold so entrenched on the territories they control that we will have to become accustomed to the existence of the 'Islamic State' (IS) and its reshaping of the modern Middle East?

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1. The term indicates a group of Muslims who after the 656 killing of the third Caliph, ‘Uthman, and the ensuing struggle between ‘Ali and Mu’awiyah invoked the need to adopt an extremely harsh stance towards Muslims committing grave sins. According to their interpretation, these people should be considered apostates and therefore deserve capital punishment. See E. Van Donzel, B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat, The Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition, Vol. IV, Brill, 1997, p. 1074-1077.

2. The term is widely used to indicate the militants fighting under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, whose acronym in Arabic reads as daesh or da’ish.
1.1 The origins: the armed jihad in Iraq

The origins of the Islamic State can be traced back to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and to the radical Islamist movement Jamat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (TwJ). The group – which operated mainly in north-western Iraq – was little known to Western security agencies and radical circles alike and was mainly composed of a few non-Iraqi operatives led by Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Taking an extremely aggressive stance as well as utilizing a media-savvy campaign, the movement soon became one of the symbols of the anti-US insurgency. It was not the bare number of attacks, but its high-level capabilities (demonstrated in dozens of terrorist operations conducted against Coalition forces and international personnel and objectives) as well as its ruthless tactics that allowed TwJ to emerge among the hundreds of groups comprising the Iraqi insurgency. In this context, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s name quickly became associated with some of the cruelest images of the Iraqi war, such as the beheading of Western prisoners, the indiscriminate killing of civilians and soldiers, as well as the attacks against the symbols of the ‘new Iraq’. These acts were presented by the Jordanian terrorist as mere responses to the subjugation and humiliation of the Islamic community, and conveyed by new and old media through extremely powerful images, like the beheading of Western hostages attired in the same orange clothes worn by Guantanamo prisoners.

Al-Zarqawi succeeded in becoming one of the most important players of the Iraq war, but he had to face the restrictions stemming from the limited resources and fighters at his disposal, as well as the mainly foreign nature of his group. This gharib paradox, as Brian Fishman called it, while preserving the cohesion of the movement and its loyalty to the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, prevented the Jordanian terrorist from accessing the wide pool of Iraqi militants operating in the country against Coalition forces, as well as the vast numbers of foreign fighters active on the ground but not aligned with his group. It is in

this context that the formation of al-Qa‘ida in the Land of the Two Rivers (better known as al-Qa‘ida in Iraq - AQI) took place in 2004. The classic marriage of convenience: al-Qa‘ida needed a charismatic leader on the ground to carry the flag of the group against US forces after the setbacks suffered in Afghanistan. Al-Zarqawi needed Osama bin Laden’s blessing to enhance his stature inside the insurgency and obtain more visibility, but – above all – to gain sufficient legitimacy among the cadres of foreign fighters who entered Iraq to respond al-Qa‘ida’s call.

AQI soon emerged as one of the most powerful groups of the insurgency but, despite the spectacularity of its attacks, it never succeeded in dominating the other groups fighting the Coalition and the nascent Iraqi security forces nor in extending its grip over significant swaths of Iraqi territory. The situation was further worsened by the three rounds of elections which took place in 2005. While Arab Sunnis de facto boycotted the January 2005 voting, the community turned out en masse for both the referendum on the constitution (October) and the December elections, even if it failed to sink the constitutional process and to obtain enough seats to exert significant influence over the new Iraqi institutions. Despite these results, the community’s participation in the electoral process was considered an existential threat by al-Zarqawi, who knew very well that his success depended heavily on the instability of the Iraqi system and on the support (or at least the connivance) of the Arab Sunni community. He decided then to shift the group’s agenda, ceasing to limit its attacks to Coalition troops, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and international personnel and waging an all-out war against the Iraqi Shia community to foster inter-community hatred and competition. The hundreds of attacks against Shia civilian, religious and political targets culminated in the June 2006 Samarra bombing – generally considered the event that marked the beginning of Iraq’s civil war. The destruction of the ‘Askariyya shrine, one of the most revered Shia holy sites, unleashed a wave of anger that not even Grand Ayatollah

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‘Ali al-Sistani could stop. Shia militias spearheaded by the Mahdi Army (and supported by important segments of the Iraqi institutions) faced Sunni insurgents led by al-Qa’ida in Iraq, with Baghdad becoming the epicentre of a spiral of terror that spread through most of the country.

While AQI forces succeeded in inflicting tremendous blows to the Shia militias and their constituencies, their opponents ultimately got the upper hand, extending their control over most of the capital and completing a sectarian cleansing which dramatically altered the demographic equilibriums of a city which has always been deeply marked by its ‘mixed’ heritage.

The defeat at the battle of Baghdad represented a huge blow for AQI, which came under growing criticism. At the international level, fellow jihadists stepped up their condemnation of the ruthless tactics adopted by the movement as well as of the decision to focus its attacks against Shia forces and not against Coalition troops and the Iraqi government. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, widely considered to be al-Zarqawi’s mentor, openly attacked the modus operandi of the organization and even Ayman al-Zawahiri – at the time Osama bin Laden’s deputy – invited the Jordanian leader to modify his tactics, especially concerning attacks against the Shia population. “People of discernment and knowledge among Muslims know the extent of danger to Islam of the […] Shiism […] [But] the majority of Muslims don’t comprehend this [and] this matter won’t be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue”.

AQI had to face serious challenges at the Iraqi level too, with several insurgent groups blaming the movement for the fall of Baghdad and opposition emerging even inside its ranks. This last element proved to be particularly significant, as it exposed a series of internal fractures that – while rooted in the foundation of AQI – emerged in all their depth in 2006. While the affiliation with al-Qa’ida provided al-Zarqawi

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with increased manpower and capabilities, it also weakened the bonds linking AQI cadres to its leadership, sowing the seeds of discontent and sedition. These rifts were exploited by AQI enemies who succeeded in infiltrating the group and in killing its leader in June 2006. The death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi represented a terrible blow for the movement, which underwent significant re-organization under the dual leadership of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi based on a twofold strategy: on the one hand, it launched an operation aimed at ‘Iraqifying’ its cadres in order to dilute the side effects of the ‘gharib paradox’; on the other, it decided to enlarge its areas of action, integrating its military operations with management of the territory under its direct control. This led the organization to lay the foundations of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an Islamic emirate which should have extended its reach over most of central-northern Iraq.

Areas claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006

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8. A measure already begun during the last months of al-Zarqawi’s tenure, when AQI merged with other insurgent groups under the umbrella of the Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin.
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Despite these efforts, the heyday of the group founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq seemed to be over: ISI’s attempt to extend its control over Arab Sunni majority governorates was met by stiff local resistance, pitting ISI forces directly against other insurgent groups and local tribal shaykhs for the control of strongholds, resources and illicit trafficking.\footnote{D. Kilcullen, “Field Notes on Iraq’s Tribal Revolt Against Al-Qa’ida”, CTC Sentinel, Vol. 1, No. 11, 15 October 2008, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/field-notes-on-iraq%E2%80%99s-tribal-revolt-against-al-qaida.}

The disputes between these former allies were not limited to material issues but also to different interpretations of Islamic precepts as well as to ISI’s violation of traditional laws and values deeply rooted in Iraq’s Arab Sunni society.\footnote{B. Fishman, Dysfunction and Decline: Lesson Learned From Inside al Qa’ida in Iraq, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, March 2009, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Dysfunction-and-Decline.pdf.} This situation led several tribal shaykhs and insurgent groups to begin considering ISI a bigger threat than the new government of Baghdad and its international allies. Coalition forces exploited these rifts, supporting the formation of military councils known as sahwa (awakening): in exchange for their support against ISI forces, these groups obtained non-persecution for their previous activities as well as money and weapons.\footnote{M. Eisenstadt, “Tribal Engagement: Lessons Learned”, Military Review, September-October 2007.}

The program – backed by a shift of US tactics and a surge of its troops on the ground – was decisive in rooting the forces of the Islamic Emirate out of most of its strongholds in central-western Iraq.\footnote{J. McCary, “The Anbar Awakening: an Alliance of incentives”, The Washington Quarterly, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2009} ISI forces had no other option than to relocate to north-western Iraq, in an area stretching around Mosul and the Niniveh plain, where it could count on a deep historical presence and good relations with local insurgent groups as well as on the benefits stemming from proximity to the Syrian border.\footnote{See A. Plebani, “Ninawa Province: Al-Qa’ida’s Remaining Stronghold”, CTC Sentinel, Vol. 3, No. 1, 13 January 2010, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/ninawa-province-al-qaida%E2%80%99s-remaining-stronghold.}

Despite these efforts the group was on its knees with its militants hunted all over the country, its operations limited to...
racket, illicit trafficking and attacks against local minorities, and the flow of volunteers from all over the world drained. In this context the killing of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi in 2010 was hailed by US and Iraqi authorities alike as a death blow inflicted on the group.

1.2 ISI’s return and its ascendance in the Levant

Amid the havoc unleashed over ISI’s ranks, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (nom de guerre of the Iraqi Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim ‘Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai) emerged as the new leader of an organization considered to be in its death throes. The new amir vowed to reverse the fate of the movement, reorganizing its ranks, stepping up its activities in its north-western strongholds and returning to organizing high-level attacks all over Iraq. He purged the group of the elements whose loyalty could not be trusted and strengthened its internal bonds in order to create a brotherhood of foreign and Iraqi operatives united by a common aim and ready to fight against anyone not sharing the same objective. Thanks to this internal re-organization as well as to the heightening polarization of Iraq’s socio-political system and to the withdrawal of US forces from the country, ISI made a slow but steady return on the Iraqi scene.14

But al-Baghdadi did not limit his reach to the “land of the two rivers” only: understanding the importance of the Syrian revolution (and the opportunities it could bring the movement) and thanks to its proximity to remaining ISI strongholds in Iraq, he decided to dispatch a contingent of hardened fighters to face pro-Assad forces. Despite their limited numbers, al-Baghdadi’s militants – who fought under the banner of a new group named Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani – proved their valour and capabilities on multiple occasions, becoming in a few months one of the most feared and admired groups of the anti-Assad insurgency. And not only for its prowess on the battlefield: in stark contrast to other groups, JAN succeeded in building

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a good reputation among the local population. The organization invested significant resources on alleviating the widespread scarcity of food and on imposing rule of law in the areas under its control through the formation of sharia courts which proved their inflexibility with criminals and – at least in the beginning – avoided imposing extremely strict Islamic rules on society. The group also made clear from the beginning its intention to collaborate with the other movements of the insurgency and with society (tribes in primis) and did not refrain from accepting Syrian volunteers in its ranks – even if only after a harsh selection aimed at co-opting the most capable and dedicated. Such a modus operandi seemed to confirm that al-Baghdadi did not want to risk repeating his predecessors’ mistakes in Iraq.

The successes on the battlefields and the good feedback from the Syrian population helped JAN to increase its local and international stature, attracting thousands of volunteers from Syria and all over the world, as well as funding from international donors which – coupled with the network of illicit activities managed by the group – replenished the movement’s coffers, allowing it to obtain advanced weapons that not only fellow insurgents but even the Assad regime could not match.

These resources allowed al-Baghdadi to step-up his activities in Iraq, too: the movement launched an anti-government campaign based on its old panoply of tactics (improvised explosive devices, multiple bombings, suicide bombings…) as well as on new means. The group claimed responsibility for a long list of assassinations of politicians, security officials and members of the sahwa forces (whose deaths were presented as retribution for their treason in 2006-2008, filmed and shown on the web as a message for its old and future opponents). It also succeeded


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in conducting high-level attacks on hard targets in the proximity of the Green Zone, the most fortified area of the capital,\(^{18}\) as well as on some of Iraq’s most important prisons – a tactic that, aside from demonstrating the Iraqi government’s inability to control the country, allowed the movement to free several of its members as well as to co-opt hundreds of prisoners with significant military skills.\(^{19}\) For several of them it was more a matter of survival than a choice stemming from the full acceptance of the group’s agenda and objectives: marginalized and persecuted by the new Iraqi government, publicly ostracized due to their (real or assumed) relations with Saddam Hussein’s regime and with no option whatsoever of returning to a normal life, they joined the ranks of ISI considering it the only opportunity to regain their honour and to fight against the Iraqi and international actors responsible for their desperate situation. Their military and strategic prowess, together with their deep knowledge of Iraq’s territories and dynamics, proved of extreme value for the future successes of the organization.

The growing strength acquired by ISI forces on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border pushed al-Baghdadi to devise a deep strategic shift. On April 9, 2013 the Iraqi leader officially declared JAN’s subservience to ISI and the merging of the two groups into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). While ISI-JAN relations were widely known to security and academic circles, the merger of the two groups was quite unexpected, due both to JAN’s self-proclaimed “Syrian-first” policy and to the great autonomy its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, seemed to enjoy \(\text{vis-à-vis}\) his Iraqi patrons. Despite al-Baghdadi’s declaration, several JAN leaders and affiliates (especially of Syrian nationality) refused to

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pledge allegiance to the new group. In a public statement issued in response to the April 9 declaration, Al-Julani praised al-Baghdadi’s support for JAN, but reaffirmed his loyalty to Ayman al-Zawahiri, de facto opposing the merger and involving al-Qa’ida’s leadership in the dispute. Al-Zawahiri tried to quell the escalation of the crisis, condemning intra-jihadi division and asking the two organizations to respect their respective areas of actions: ISI in Iraq and JAN in Syria. Despite its formal and conciliating tones, the message of the Egyptian leader was a clear rebuke to al-Baghdadi’s ambitions. The move did not pay off and the dispute evolved into an open struggle, leading to a schism of the intra-jihadi forces affiliated with the al-Qa’ida network both in Syria and beyond the borders of Mesopotamia and the Levant. Al-Baghdadi seemed to get the upper hand: he obtained the support of most of JAN forces (especially among its foreign cadres), occupied several of its most important strongholds (especially in and around Raqqa) and openly criticized the stance taken by Osama bin Laden’s heir.

After several failed mediations and hundreds of victims, the feud ended last February with al-Qa’ida’s formal disavowal of ISIS.20

Al-Baghdadi’s April 2013 declaration had far-reaching effects not only on the broader radical Islamist galaxy but also on local Syrian and Iraqi dynamics. From that moment on, the group adopted a much more aggressive stance (both towards the population and towards the other groups of the Syrian insurgency) aimed at laying the foundations of a truly Islamic State under the direct authority of the Iraqi leader. The control exerted over civilians in Raqqa and in the other main ISIS strongholds became more intrusive and oppressive, with cruel and public punishments taking place on a daily basis – a means used to instil fear among supporters and foes alike. At the same time, al-Baghdadi completely changed his attitude towards the other groups of the insurgency, adopting an extremely polarizing modus operandi based on

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an “either with us or against us” approach and on a vision of the Islamic message deeply hostile to any other interpretation. A new stance which considered the ‘other’ (i.e. everyone not recognizing ISIS’ dominance) an enemy to be crushed using every means, no matter whether he belongs to regime or insurgent forces or whether the fight provokes humanitarian tragedies and widespread violations of human rights. Such a strategic shift allowed Daesh forces to strengthen their hold over growing swaths of territories, but exacerbated its relations with the other Syrian insurgents. Day by day ISIS forces shifted their attention from the regime’s strongholds towards fellow insurgents in the area of Raqqa as well as to northern and eastern Syrian territories, beginning an all-out war that caused thousands of victims and severely weakened the anti-Assad insurgency. While in most cases the Syrian insurgents proved no match for ISIS forces, the jihadi group had to face a significant setback at the beginning of 2014, when a joint operation led by some of the most important groups of the insurgency obliged Daesh forces to abandon several important bases in the north, and especially in the areas of Idlib and Aleppo. But it was an ephemeral victory: ISIS was already involved in a series of major operations in Iraq which would have soon transformed the movement into the most important insurgent group on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border.

1.3 From insurgents to state-makers: the fall of Mosul and the creation of the new Caliphate

2014 marked the beginning of ISIS’ all-out offensive against the Iraqi state. The invasion culminating in the fall of Mosul was preceded by months of heightening violence which allowed al-Baghdadi to


destabilize most of Iraq’s Arab-Sunni heartland as well as to weaken the cohesion and morale of the Shia-majority federal troops stationed in north-western Iraq. But these results could have never been achieved without the gradual but steady deterioration of the Iraqi social pact especially along the Shia-Sunni axis. Fuelled by discrimination, neglect and non-respect of the agreements made with key political and tribal actors, growing segments of the Arab Sunni community stepped up their opposition towards the government of the Shiite Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, considered biased and inherently hostile. As a result, huge protests enflamed central-western Iraq in 2013, with whole provinces completely paralyzed and connections with Syria and Jordan halted. Al-Maliki refused to renege on his uncompromising stance and tried to quell the manifestations by using heavy-handed tactics. His decision didn’t pay off and the crisis reached its peak with the Hawija massacre (April 2013), when clashes between protestors and security forces resulted in hundreds of deaths and in the explosion of a new wave of ethno-sectarian violence.

Once again whole parts of Iraqi territory spun completely out of control, providing ISIS with ideal conditions for a full-scale return. Building on the deepening gulf separating Baghdad and the Arab Sunni community, as well as on the important resources the group acquired, ISIS succeeded in re-establishing significant in-roads in the same Arab Sunni domains which only a few years before had been the seats of bloody feuds that pitted the movement against its former tribal and insurgent allies. Despite this legacy of hatred, the common opposition to


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Baghdad prevailed, thanks also to the traditional flexibility of local tribal dynamics, rather aptly described by the old adage “me against my brother, my brother and I against my cousin, and all of us against the stranger”. The stranger being in this case the al-Maliki-led administration.

This marriage of convenience did not take long to show its fruits: the upsurge of violence registered in 2013 (with levels similar to those recorded in the final stages of the civil war\textsuperscript{26}) obliged al-Maliki to postpone provincial elections in al-Anbar and Niniveh, whose population dwindled significantly due to the exodus of thousands of families escaping the areas hit by the ISIS-insurgents attacks. This trend worsened at the beginning of 2014 when Daesh-backed insurgents succeeded in expelling Iraqi security forces from growing swaths of the al-Anbar governorate – Ramadi and Fallujah included.\textsuperscript{27} The move allowed ISIS to weaken Baghdad’s hold over its western territories, to co-opt new volunteers, to strengthen its partnership with local Arab Sunni partners, and to infiltrate the administrations they established – a passage of critical importance in preparation for the battle that would bring all Arab-Sunni territories under ISIS direct control.

From that moment on, al-Baghdadi’s forces launched an all-out armed campaign over an arc of crisis stretching from al-Anbar and Niniveh in the west to Diyala in the east. Critical for Daesh success was its military prowess that allowed it to defeat forces often superior numerically and in weaponry terms. Far from being a band of irregulars with scarce military notions, the group could count on the expertise of a bunch of selected fighters coming from the ranks of Saddam’s former army as well as from cadres of hardened jihadists who fought all over the world. Aside from its military capabilities, ISIS showed also significant diplomatic and tactical skills, often achieving its objectives without shooting a single bullet.


Critical for this outcome has been the presence of Iraqi militants amid its ranks, who – relying on their deep knowledge of local equilibriums and dynamics (as well as on their tribal affiliations) – proved fundamental to brokering *ad hoc* agreements and alliances.\(^{28}\) Equally important has been ISIS’ ability to exploit the aura of ferocity imbuing Daesh fighters, instilling horror in the hearts of its enemies through the adoption of cruel methods shown to the wider public through an effectively media-savvy strategy. These measures proved decisive to weakening the morale and the discipline of its enemies, both among its local opponents and its ISF counterparts.

The 2014 ISIS offensive differed from the group’s previous attempts not only for the important military and diplomatic capabilities it demonstrated, but also for its multi-pronged strategy that, together with aiming at encircling Baghdad, focused on strengthening Daesh hold especially over Mosul and the Niniveh plains.\(^{29}\) The reasons for this stance were multiple: while the ISF could count on the presence of over 60,000 units on the ground, they had to face stiff local opposition and its presence was spread thin over the territory – a situation that was frequently exploited by Daesh forces to break ISF lines of communications and to eliminate their isolated units.\(^{30}\) Critical in this context was also the geopolitical location of the area which allowed al-Baghdadi to exploit the strategic depth offered by the Syrian battleground and the restive al-Anbar province. Equally important was also the deep historical presence ISIS established in and around Mosul\(^ {31}\) as well as the backing offered

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28. Author’s interview with Munqith Dagher, Ceo, Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies, Amman, August 2014.


the movement by other important insurgent groups. These favourable conditions proved fundamental for ISIS’ most successful offensive: the battle of Mosul. On June 10, 2014, after less than 3 days of battle, the second Iraqi city – home to an estimated population of over one million and a half – fell into the hands of a coalition spearheaded by Daesh units but supported by important insurgent groups. The Iraqi army retreated ignominiously, with officers fleeing the city a few hours before and thousands of soldiers leaving weapons and uniforms behind to save their lives. It was the brightest military success obtained by jihadi forces since the beginning of the new century – a result that allowed ISIS to access the huge military deposits of the north, to acquire over 450 million dollars stored in Mosul banks, to control a series of oil-rich areas close to the ones it already administered in Syria and to kidnap the Turkish consul and several members of his staff. Above all, it allowed al-Baghdadi to extend his hold over a string of territories stretching from north-eastern Syria to the very heart of Iraq’s Arab Sunni domains, laying the foundations of an 'Islamic State' – a result that has been the group’s main goal since at least 2006. A goal difficult to achieve but tangible and concrete, in the midst of a regional scenario that saw the failure of old ideologies (i.e. Arab Socialism, Ba’thism…), different Islamist streams (Political Islam versions included) and of imported foreign-state models. The establishment of an Islamic emirate in Raqqa and later in Mosul and the ability to hold and manage them (even if recurring to an extremely authoritarian and ruthless modus operandi) were other proofs of ISIS sophistication. More than 18 years after the Taliban conquered Kabul, another Islamic emirate was created and, this time, not at the periphery but at the core of Islamic civilization: a step that even Ayman al-Zawahiri indicated in his 2001 book Knights under the Prophet’s banner as fundamental to aspiring to final victory. The importance of this


result, especially after the movement wrested control over Mosul, was not lost either at the local or at the international level, strengthening ISIS’ credentials inside the broader radical Islamist galaxy and obliging several local and international actors to come to terms with an advance that no one believed could have taken place.

But al-Baghdadi did not limit himself to consolidating his hold over the new territories or to continuing the offensive in Iraq and Syria. He stepped up the level of confrontation and on June 29 – the first day of Ramadan – he proclaimed the creation of a new Caliphate under his rule as *Amir al-Mu’minin* (Commander of the Believers), asking all the believers to join him in his fight against the oppressors of Islam.

“O *ummah* of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: the camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of *kufr* (disbelief) and hypocrisy […]. Indeed the Muslims were defeated after the fall of their *khilafah* (caliphate). Then their state ceased to exist, so the disbelievers were able to weaken and humiliate the Muslims, dominate them in every region, plunder their wealth and resources, and rob them of their rights. […] O Muslims everywhere, […] raise your head high, for today – by Allah’s grace – you have a state and *khilafah*, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership”.34

In doing so, he tried to present himself as the legitimate successor of the Prophet, adopting a name (Abu Omar al-Husseini al-Hashimi al-Qurashi al-Baghdadi) reflecting his purported descent from Prophet Muhammad’s family and donning the black turban of the *sayyid*. These moves were part of a scheme aimed at consolidating his legitimacy and asserting his authority over the territories under his control as well as over the other jihadi groups based in different parts of the globe, as clearly expressed by IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani: “We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of *khilafah*, it is incumbent upon

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all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the *khalifah* Ibrahim\(^{35}\) and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the *khilafah*’s authority and arrival of its troops to their areas”\(^{36}\).

Al-Baghdadi’s declaration was not directed toward local actors and jihadi groups only, but also towards the thousands of foreign volunteers willing to join the Syrian and Iraqi armed jihad. It is in this context that the new Caliph’s appeal to migrate to the lands of the Islamic State\(^ {37}\) needs to be read: in this way he attempted to monopolize the stream of international volunteers while at the same time subtracting potential would-be fighters from other jihadi groups, al-Qa’ida *in primis*. A battle for foreign fighters’ ‘hearts and minds’ that IS seems currently to be winning, as aptly described by Aaron Zelin: “ISIS is not only talking the talk about establishing an Islamic state, it is walking the walk. This has attracted many foreign fighters to its side. […] Additionally, individuals like winners and, unlike al-Qaeda, which has not had a clear victory in a decade, ISIS continues to build its prestige and legitimacy within the overall movement”\(^{38}\).

1.4 What future for the Islamic State?

Despite all the territorial gains made and the successes obtained against regular and irregular troops alike, the Islamic State is far from being invincible. Even if there are no reliable estimates of the numerical strength of the group, it seems IS can count on only a few thousand

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\(^{35}\) Another name with which is indicated al-Baghdadi


\(^{37}\) “Rush O Muslims to your state. […] Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis. […]O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing *hijrah* (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because *hijrah* to the land of Islam is obligatory”. Al-Hayat Media Center, 2014.

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fighters organized along what appears to be a complex multi-layered structure.\(^{39}\) At the core there would be a series of elite units composed of the most capable and dedicated Daesh fighters, some of whom joined the group’s ranks during Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s tenure. This bunch of hardened fighters is said to comprise a significant number of foreign fighters with high-level combat skills acquired all over the world. These élite units appear to be supported by thousands of members of more recent affiliation; particularly significant among their ranks seems to be the percentage of militants of local (Syrian and especially Iraqi) descent who provided the group with important military and tactical skills as well as with their deep knowledge of the territory and of its equilibriums. Their contribution has been particularly important to re-establishing direct relations with important local tribes, to moulding tactical alliances with other insurgent groups as well as to benefitting from the support, or at least the connivance, of the Arab Sunni communities inhabiting the areas occupied by the movement as well as from their in-group solidarity. Despite their relatively recent affiliation they should be considered an integral part of the organization, having joined it out of full identification with its message and goal or due to a lack of possible alternatives. To the outer ring belong cadres of new affiliates and external groups (of tribal or insurgent nature) who pledged their support to IS only in the past few months to benefit from its success or out of fear of being harmed for their opposition. This multifarious structure can represent a significant weakness that could be exploited by al-Baghdadi’s enemies: while IS first and second tiers will have to be defeated through a massive military offensive, the elements on the outer level could be persuaded to renege their actual collaboration by adopting a “carrot and stick approach” similar to the one that led to the formation of the \textit{sahwa} groups. Al-Baghdadi’s hold over the territory under his authority is far from being absolute and is dependent on the

\(^{39}\) The description of the inner structure of the Islamic State here presented is the result of several interviews conducted by the author since 2009. Among the experts interviewed there are: Ibrahim al-Marashi, Kamal Field al-Basri, Munqith Dagher, Bakhtiar Amin and Safa al-Sheikh Hussein.
tactical support of a wide array of tribal and insurgent actors, whose long-term agendas are significantly different from IS’. In this context, the formation of a new government in Iraq under the leadership of Haider al-Abadi can represent a potential turning point, able to distance local Arab Sunni actors from IS’ uncomfortable embrace, but only if adequate local, regional and international support is provided.

In any case this will not be an easy task. On the one hand IS is much stronger than AQI/ISI was at the height of the civil war; on the other, local insurgents and Arab Sunni tribes appear much more fragmented and weaker than at the time of the US surge. Furthermore, Iraqi forces are still recovering from the tremendous setback suffered in the north and continue to be widely perceived as Shia-dominated, while Kurdish *peshmergas* cannot defeat Daesh forces by themselves. Despite US aerial support, the lack of US troops on the ground represents another significant limit, since their contribution proved to be critical in the past both to inflict decisive blows to the enemy and to reach an agreement with the different actors of the insurgency.\(^\text{40}\) Similar considerations can be made for the Syrian side of the equation, albeit the manifest superiority of al-Baghdadi forces to the other groups of the insurgency, the controversial stance taken by the Bashar al-Assad regime towards the Islamic State and the reluctance of the international community to intervene risk making a Daesh defeat even more complicated than in Iraq.

Apart from internal Syrian and Iraqi dynamics, al-Baghdadi is facing far stiffer opposition from key regional and extra-regional actors than a few months ago, as demonstrated by the recent American raids as well as by the critical support provided by Europe to civilians and anti-IS forces. The regional situation, too, is far more negative for IS than before: Teheran stepped up its efforts to protect its key Iraqi ally through direct assistance to the Iraqi government and the main Shia paramilitary units, while Ankara seems to have abandoned its previous controversial stance towards the movement, especially after the kidnapping of its consul in

\(^{40}\) Interview of the author with Dr. Ibrahim al-Marashi, California State University San Marcos, August 2014.
Mosul and the defeats Daesh forces inflicted on its allies in southern Kurdistan. Persian Gulf countries have also adopted a harsher stance towards the group, even if several reports indicated private donations from Khaleji states as one of the main sources of income for the Islamic State.41

IS will have to face significant challenges also at the military and administrative levels: while its forces proved to be formidable foes during their offensive, it would be far more difficult for them to hold the ground conquered, especially in case Baghdad and Erbil – with adequate regional and international support – succeed in launching a major joint counteroffensive.42 Neither will it be easy for the group to replicate its success in north-eastern peshmerga strongholds or in the Baghdad area, where it will find a far less conducive environment, due to strong opposition from inhabitants and to the fact that the anti-ISIS front will fight to the death to defend territories that are home to their own families and not areas widely perceived as strongholds of hostile populations.43 Difficulties could also stem from the day-to-day management of the areas under al-Baghdadi’s control: while the movement succeeded in providing basic services to the population, these efforts required the allocation of significant human and financial resources that the group had to subtract from other activities and which could exact, especially in the long term, a significant toll.

Adding to this picture is also the widening IS-al-Qa‘ida fissure. The proclamation of the Caliphate represented the umpteenth challenge launched by al-Baghdadi to Ayman al-Zawahiri’s leadership over al-Qa‘ida and the broader radical Islamist galaxy. The rift has significantly weakened the current AQ leader but he still retains the support of the

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vast majority of AQ regional nodes. While an all-out confrontation between AQ and IS seems quite unlikely, at least for the time being, al-Baghdadi’s ambitions (and the significant appeal the latter has acquired especially among the youngest cadres of foreign fighters) could push al-Zawahiri to adopt a much harsher stance, damaging IS agendas not only in Iraq and Syria but also on a much wider scale, since both movements are competing for the support of would-be jihadists coming from all over the world.

IS’ agenda and modus operandi have also been harshly contested by several top Sunni scholars belonging to different schools of thought like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and al-Azhar scholars. Severe criticism has also been levelled against the group by religious experts known for their extreme and radical views, like Abu Qatada al-Filistini, Abu Basir al-Tartusi and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. While this stance has not yet significantly diminished the appeal the group enjoys, it could limit its backing in the medium-long term, especially if IS will keep resorting to its extreme tactics. While fear is a powerful tool, it is also a double-edged sword that might contribute to foster anti-IS sentiments and to accelerate the group’s demise. The stance adopted by these religious experts appears also to be shared by a growing number of Gulf dignitaries who in the past did not refrain from publicly sustaining extremist forces operating in Syria and Iraq. Far from being limited to Iraq and Syria only, the global appeal of the Caliphate led by al-Baghdadi risks becoming a serious menace also for those regimes which – directly or indirectly – contributed to its ascendance and whose legitimacy could be contested by the same warriors they sustained.

While Daesh forces have proven to be an extremely able foe, they are far from being invincible and their ambitions are hindered by several

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limits. Defeating IS is therefore far from impossible but it will require a multi-pronged strategy supported by as many actors as possible, both at the regional and at the international levels. Particularly critical will be the role regional actors will play: Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey in primis. Without their backing IS will continue to threaten the region and the international system, no matter the amount of raids the US and its allies will be able to conduct against its positions. It will not be an easy or fast struggle but is a battle that deserves to be fought. For the sake of the population living under Daesh grip or threatened by its forces, as well as for our own future, since never as in this moment has the enemy we can fight today in Syria and in Iraq been the one we risk facing tomorrow in our own countries.