



INTERNATIONAL

THE ROOTS OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

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Foto: Twitter. Via Newsweek.

The Islamic State demolishes a Sufi mosque in Mosul. Photo disseminated through social networks.

It is commonly accepted that the so-called Islamic State stems from the terrorist group Al Qaeda in Iraq and, therefore, is a by-product of the military intervention that overthrew Saddam Hussein. However, the very Al Qaeda in Iraq, led by the brutal Abu Musab al-Zarqawi until he was removed by US troops in June 2006, was actually a convenient and transitory group between a previous project and the current Islamic State.

This paper will try to shed some light on the nature of the Islamic State, its goals and means and, therefore, how to end the threat. We will also trace the real roots of the currently called Islamic State and its permanent goals which, as we shall see, go far beyond each individual phase of its existence and each denomination chosen at each given time by its leaders.

The Islamic State was not born out of the desire to fight allied intervention in Iraq in 2003, but out of the ambition to “purify” the Muslim world itself. Its rise has to do mainly with unbridled passions between Sunnis and Shiites and with the absence of international forces.

The Islamic State: Proto-History

In order to understand the goals, methods and ideology behind the Islamic State we must go back to Al Zarqawi’s first steps as a jihadist and not just his time as the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq. The Islamic State is not an invention arising out of nowhere in June 2014. Quite the opposite.

Al Zarqawi takes his nom de guerre from the small town where he was born, Al Zarqa, about 40 kilometres northeast of Amman, the Jordanian capital. His real name was Ahmed Fadel al Jalaylah. His family belonged to the Bedouin tribe Bani Hassan. As a teenager, Ahmed was the neighbourhood bully and became a juvenile delinquent, even ending in prison for drug possession and sexual assault.

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Alarmed by his misconduct, his mother, Um Sayel, compulsorily enrolled him in a course on religion in the Al Husayn Ben Ali Mosque in Amman. As Michael Weiss, a columnist for *Foreign Policy*, says “The experience was transformative, but not in the way Um Sayel might have hoped”¹. It was in the mosque’s teachings that Ahmed discovered Salafism, not mercy.

Inspired and eager to advance the jihad, Al Zarqawi travelled to Afghanistan to fight the Russians late in 1989, too late actually to seriously participate in the holy war, since Russian troops were already preparing to leave the country. However, he remained in the region until 1992, making multiple contacts with the mujahideen leaders and the followers of Bin Laden.

Al Zarqawi returned to Jordan in late 1992, where he met an acquaintance of Hayatabad, the Palestinian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who had created a small Salafist cell called *Bayt al-Iman* (the House of the Imam). When the Jordanian secret service, the GID, learned that he kept explosives from the Iran War of 1991 at home, it raided his house and both Al-Zarqawi and Maqdisi were arrested. In late 1994, both were sentenced to 15 years in prison and transferred to a maximum-security prison called Swaqa. It is in this prison that Al Zarqawi refined his radical beliefs, developed his tactics of domination and outshined al-Maqsidi as a Jihadist leader².

¹ Weiss, Michael & Hassan, Hassan: *ISIS, Inside the Army of Terror*. New York, Regan Arts 2015, p. 2.

² Brisard, JeanCharles & Martínez, Damien: *Zarqawi: The new face of Al Qaeda*. London, Other Press 2005, pp. 42 and ss.

After the death of King Hussein in February 1999, his son and new king, Abdullah II, declared a general amnesty that set free more than 3,000 convicts, many of them jihadists without blood crimes. One of them was al-Zarqawi, having served only one third of his sentence.

After a failed attempt to blow up a hotel in Amman, sometime in the summer of 1999 Zarqawi appears in Kandahar, Afghanistan, with the aim of getting an audience with the leaders of Al Qaeda to request their help in promoting the Islamic revolution in the Levant, from the Mediterranean to Iraq. Bin Laden rejected meeting him, fearing that he might be an agent of the Jordanian intelligence, and it may be that this marked the tense kind of relationship the two always had. In any case, the lieutenant of bin Laden in the city, Saif al-Adel, monitored and scrutinized him, and although he was not convinced of his proposals, he persuaded bin Laden about the convenience to use him to attract Jordanians and Palestinians to their cause.

Al Zarqawi was thus graced with approximately \$200,000 to run a training camp for jihadists of the Fertile Crescent. The camp was in Herat and was called *Jund al-Sham*, the “Soldiers of the Levant”. The banner above the entrance to the camp carried the slogan that would later become the name of Al-Zarqawi’s first terrorist cell: *Tawhid wal-Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad).

However, the first meeting between Bin Laden and al-Zarqawi did not go well, it highlighted the strategic differences that separated them. Al Qaeda differentiates between the “near enemy” and the “far enemy” and is inclined to directly attack the distant one, that is, the Americans; Al Zarqawi believed that the priority was to attack the *kuffar*, that is, the Shiites and the Sunnis who were not strict Salafists. Bin Laden looked to New York and Washington, while the Jordanian had his eyes set on his native country.

At this time, Al Zarqawi discovered the historical figure of Nur al-Din Zengi, the brutal ruler of a territory stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Mosul in Iraq. Nur al-Din

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was ruthless in his defence of Islam and along with his protégé Saladin he managed to beat Richard the Lionheart’s crusaders.

The influence of Nur al-Din in Al Zarqawi is not trivial, since it explains his decision to go to Iraq after the fall of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 2001 after the American intervention. With the overthrow of the Taliban regime, Al Zarqawi fled to Iran, where he received the help and protection of a former friend of his, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former Afghan prime minister. Based in Iran, Al Zarqawi travelled extensively to northern Iraq, where one of his lieutenants, the fellow Jordanian Abu Abdel Rahman al-Shami, had consolidated an area of some 500 square kilometres in which he had imposed the *sharia* and its rigid interpretation of the Koran. His group was called “Soldiers of Islam” and after 9/11 it came to be called *Ansar al-Islam* (“Helpers of Islam”), a term originally given to the companions of Prophet Muhammad.

In line with the strategic approach of its inspirer, Al Zarqawi, the terrorist activities of the *Ansar al-Islam* had two basic targets: the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of *Jalal Talabani*.

While preparing and structuring his network in Iraq, in the correct belief that the United States would invade the country sooner or later, Al Zarqawi also managed to set up some operational networks in Syria, where he was spending more and more time. From there he managed to successfully organize the assassination of the maximum American representative for cooperation in Jordan, Laurence Foley, while in those months, other plots aimed at Jordanian policemen were derailed in time.



“Al Qaeda in Irak continued distancing itself from Bin Laden’s organization: instead of stopping the killing of Shiites, it increased its attacks in order to accelerate the civil war in Iraq”

After the intervention in Iraq in March 2003, Al Zarqawi travelled to Baghdad to conduct his operations *in situ*. His group was responsible for the first terrorist attacks in August of that year, attacks that would define the course of the war in Iraq. The first attack, following his obsession for his country, was against the Embassy of Jordan; the second, against the UN headquarters; the third, precursor of his sectarian violence, against the Imam Ali Mosque, one of the sacred places of Shiite Islam. He would also kill the Ayatollah al-Hakim, an undisputed spiritual leader among the Shiite community, protected by Iran, but open to cooperate with the forces of the international coalition.

Although Western observers considered that the main attack was the car bomb that killed Sergio Vieira de Mello at the UN headquarters, Al Zarqawi’s eyes were set on his closest enemies, the Shiite majority in the country. In a letter sent to Bin Laden in January 2004, he clearly explains his strategy in Iraq: “The Shia are the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the evil scorpion, the penetrating venom. Shiism is the real danger.”³ Al Zarqawi’s strategy was clear: starting a civil war by attacking the Shiite population on all fronts.⁴

With a growing need for financial resources and external support, Al Zarqawi stated in February 2004 his desire to do something that Bin Laden had asked him to do and that he had rejected several times before: pledge public allegiance to him and join

³ The text of the letter can be found on the website of the Council of Foreign Relations: <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/letterabumusabalzarqawiosamabinladen/p9863>

⁴ Napoleoni, Loretta: *Insurgent Iraq: Al Zarqawi and the new generation*. London, Seven Stories Press, 2005, pp. 161 and ss.

Al Qaeda. His condition that the leaders of Al Qaeda would have to assume his strategy and provoke the Shia did not really agree with Bin Laden and his lieutenants, but given that Al Qaeda needed to strengthen its brand in the fight against the infidels, the request to become Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was formally accepted in October 2004. It soon proved to be an arranged marriage inevitably doomed to fail.

The Islamic State: Its Prehistory

Between the summer of 2003 and late 2005, Al Zarqawi did his best to advance his strategy of promoting a civil war between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq. His group, *Tawihd wal-Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad), was unfortunately famous for resorting to suicide attacks and brutal violence. Half the suicide bombers in recent years have come from the ranks of Al Zarqawi's organization. Al Zarqawi himself would become famous to the world after the video broadcasted on the Internet of the beheading of Nicholas Berg, a young American entrepreneur, executed in May 2004 by Al Zarqawi himself. In 2005, the Iraqi victims of violence by his organization exceeded 2,000 per month.

His dedication to kill Shiites was such that, in less than a year, Al Qaeda's leadership ordered him to stop these killings. While in January 2005 Bin Laden had granted the title of emir of Al Qaeda in Iraq to al-Zarqawi, in July, Al Qaeda's number two, the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, had to send a letter to the Jordanian ordering him to change strategy. Al Zawahiri called for a change in priorities telling him to focus on the expulsion of the American invaders and not on the creation of a Sunni emirate. More important still, Al Zawahiri showed his displeasure with the massacres of Shiites and reminded the emir of Al Qaeda in Iraq that such actions would fail to gain the popular support needed by the cause of the Caliphate.⁵

⁵ The full text of the letter can be found on the website of West Point Institute, Combating Terrorism Center: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahirislettertozarqawienglishtranslation2>.



“In 2006 Al Masri accepted the leadership of AQI only to dissolve it. Thus, just four months after his appointment by the Shura, he officially proclaimed the birth of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)”

A few months later, and given Al Zarqawi's apparent lack of change under the acronym AQI,⁶ another leader of Al Qaeda very close to Bin Laden, Atiya Abd al-Rahman, wrote again to remind the leader in Iraq the need for popular support and offered him a history lesson that he knew well: the GIA in Algeria, which managed to turn the population against them due to their outrageous violence. He also reminded him of Bin Laden's opinion that an emirate should only be built once the invading forces could not destroy it, as happened in Afghanistan, and that they should be patient.⁷

The letter also included a very important announcement that predicted AQI's fate: executing Sunni tribal leaders involved the great danger of losing their support, and should be done only when charges of corruption and such were evident to the entire population. In fact, AQI's execution of a sheikh of the Albu Nimr tribe, based in Ramadi and in the Anbar province, mark the beginning of the end of the collaboration between AQI and the Sunni tribes that had given Al Zarqawi so much strength until then.⁸

⁶ It is impossible to list here AQI's multiple terrorist attacks in 2005, but many newspapers published news about them at the time they happened. For instance *The Guardian*: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jun/08/iraq.alqaida1>

⁷ West Point Combating Terrorism Center: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/atiyahslettterttozarqawienglish-translation2>.

⁸ A good description of how the American troops used the growing frictions between AQI and the tribes can be found in the memoirs of Gral. Petraeus, by Broadwell, Paula: *All in. The education of General David Petraeus*, New York, Penguin books, 2012 and in the analysis by the Institute for the Study of War: *The Anbar Awakening*. On their website: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/reports/IraqReport03.pdf>.

In an interview published after his death and presumably recorded in early 2006, Al Zarqawi was open to criticism from his superiors of Al Qaeda, but he never changed strategy. Instead, on January 15 of that year, Al Zarqawi established the *Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen fi al-Iraq* (or the Mujahidin Advisory Council of Iraq). At first it was interpreted as a move to reduce one of the criticisms most often repeated among Iraqi Sunnis: that AQI was an organization of foreigners and did not always meet local needs. However, it is more than likely that Al Zarqawi was already considering distancing himself from the orders of Al Qaeda and laying the foundations of an Islamic emirate in the provinces controlled by the groups making up this Advisory Council (*Shura*). This interpretation is supported by a video of April 2006, in which Al Zarqawi says that the *Shura* is the starting point “to establish an Islamic state”. He added that “our hope is that in three months the circumstances will become favourable and we will be able to announce the Islamic emirate in Iraq.”⁹

At the same time, AQI continued distancing itself from Bin Laden’s organization with regard to its strategy and, instead of heeding their instructions and stopping the killing of Shiites, it increased its attacks in order to accelerate the civil war in Iraq. Thus, on 22 February, four AQI militants, dressed in uniforms of the Iraqi Interior Ministry, detonated a large quantity of explosives which destroyed the al-Askari mosque in Samarra, one of the holy sites of Shiite Islam, Pantheon of two imams of the 9th century and erected on the tunnel that is believed hid Mohamed al-Mahdi, the twelfth imam whose return is awaited by the Shiite community. The destruction of the mosque sparked tensions between religious sects and put the country on the path of civil war typical of that time.¹⁰

⁹ In: Bunzel, Cole: *From Paper State to Caliphate: the Ideology of the Islamic State*. Washington DC, Brookings, March, 2015, p. 16.

¹⁰ To see the importance and impact of the mosque’s destruction see *The Times*: “How the fate of one Holy Site could plunge Iraq back into a civil war”. June 26, 2014. <http://time.com/2920692/iraqisissamar-raalaskarimosque/>

From then until his death, Al Zarqawi would see how his dream of bringing Sunnis and Shiites into conflict was becoming true: the mutual attacks were brutal, ruthless and caused thousands of deaths on both sides. His vision, careful planning and use of violence were giving the results he expected. Not surprisingly, Al Zarqawi was a faithful follower of what has become one of the most important books among the current members of the Islamic State, *The Management of Savagery*, published online in 2004 and signed by Abu Bakr Naji, which combine a field manual on how to conduct operations against the infidels and enemies of Islam and a manifesto for the restoration of the Caliphate.¹¹

However, Al Zarqawi would not get to enjoy much of his successes nor would he see the creation of his coveted emirate or Islamic state in Iraq. Through the monitoring of his spiritual adviser, Abd Al-Rahman, whose name was provided in an interrogation in the town of Abu Ghraib, Kassim al-Ani, the coalition troops were able to identify and locate Al Zarqawi in Hibhib, a town northeast of Baghdad. On the evening of June 7, 2006, with the intelligence provided by a drone, an F16 dropped a laser-guided bomb of 250 kg followed by a second, satellite-guided munition. Al Zarqawi died as McChrystal's men reached the scene.

The Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq: The Proto-Caliphate

Eliminating Al Zarqawi, celebrated though it was in his day, did not however entail the disappearance of his terrorist group. Rather, the opposite is true, because when an organization has strong ideological and religious foundations, it will always find ways to rebuild its leadership in a short time. AQI's case is paradigmatic. Four days after the death of Al Zarqawi, the Mujahideen *Shura* chose Abu Ayyub al-Masri as the new head of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

¹¹ An English translation can be found on: <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abubakrnajithemanagementofsavagerythemostrcriticalstagethroughwhichtheummawillpass.pdf>

“The constitution of the Islamic State of Iraq would bring considerable confusion. Al Qaeda had not been consulted about it and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi not only had not renewed his pledge of allegiance to Bin Laden, but indeed demanded it from everyone else”



Al-Masri was an experienced terrorist. In 1982 he joined the Islamic Jihad then headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri. When Al Zawahiri joined Al Qaeda, Masri went with him to Afghanistan, where he specialized in bomb-making. It was there he met Al Zarqawi.¹² Under his command he moved to Baghdad in 2002 to organize the cells of Al Zarqawi's group.

Most surprising is that Al Masri accepted the leadership of AQI only to dissolve it in just a few months' time. Thus, on 15 October of that same year, 2006, just four months after his appointment by the *Shura*, Muharib al-Jubouri, spokesman for Al-Masri, announced on a nine-minute video the transformation of AQI and the rest of the groups that comprised it, officially proclaiming the birth of the Islamic State of Iraq (Dawlat al-'Iraq al-Islamiyya).¹³ The name of its new leader was also announced: Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.

At the time, Western intelligence never believed that Abu Omar was the real leader since he was a total stranger to them. Indeed, it was even thought that he did not exist and that it was all a ploy by Al-Masri, an Egyptian, to deepen the image of a purely Iraqi organization. Hence the name of Al-Baghdadi, leading to think that he was a native of Baghdad, the Iraqi capital.¹⁴

¹² See: Global Security Org: http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/profiles/abu_ayyub_almasri.htm

¹³ The full video can be watched on: <https://archive.org/details/song-of-terror-main-8> (it is important to note the use of “of” instead of “in”, which shows the ambition of its leaders).

¹⁴ See, for instance: <http://www.threatswatch.org/analysis/2007/12/thefictionofabuomaralbagh/>
<http://www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/?p=7883>

Two months later, on December 22, Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi delivered his first major statement as the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). To begin with, he used the expression “Prince of the Faithful” or “Commander of the Believers” arrogating a spiritual authority to himself that far exceeded that of Bin Laden. In fact, that is a title normally reserved for caliphs; secondly, he was addressing the *Ummah*, namely the global community of Muslims; thirdly, he announced plans to create and expand the Islamic State with the aim of making it present from “China to Spain.”¹⁵ The title of his speech was quite an announcement about his ambition to monopolize the *jihad*: “The truth has come and falsehood has vanished away.”

The constitution of the Islamic State of Iraq would bring considerable confusion to two fronts. First, to the core of the jihadists. Al Qaeda not only had not been consulted about it, but Abu Omar al-Baghdadi had not renewed his pledge of allegiance to Bin Laden, made reluctantly and for convenience’s sake by Al Zarqawi in 2004, but indeed demanded it from everyone else. Blinded by violence, Westerners never understood that Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was sowing the ground for the creation of a new Caliphate.

In any case, the statements of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi did nothing but deepen the divide between Iraqi leaders and Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda. During the following months, jihadist forums exploded with discussions about why an Islamic state should be declared and the implications such an action would entail. Angered by their marginalization and frustrated because they had not followed his advice about the use of violence against the Shiites, Al Zawahiri wrote to Al-Masri on several occasions demanding information about his leadership and their plans. The latest letter of which we have news, because it was intercepted by American troops, dates

¹⁵ The full text in English can be read on: <http://ia600303.us.archive.org/32/items/TruthHasComeAnd-FalsehoodHasVanished/TruthHasComeAndFalsehoodHasVanished.pdf>.

“The 2007 terror campaign, which included several British-American military operations, succeeded in significantly reducing the operational capability of the ISI”



from March 6, 2008. In it, Al Zawahiri demands “a full and detailed response” to their questions and accusations.¹⁶

The second front of confusion was on the side of the international coalition: obsessed with Al Zarqawi, the ISI was never taken seriously (they continued calling it AQI). However, despite the violence unleashed in 2007 by the ISI, the combination of the replacement of military commanders in Iraq (now headed by General Petraeus), the reaction of the “Awakening” of Sunni tribes against the ISI and George W. Bush’s decision to increase deployment in the area, the so-called “surge,” were able to reduce the operations of the terrorist group.

However, 2007 was a year plagued by bombings and attacks carried out by members of the ISI who, for the first time, resorted to attacks with chemical elements in Ramadi, Fallujah and Amiriya; they destroyed again what remained of the mosque in Samarra, they attacked Yezidis and Kurds, eliminated Sunni leaders of the Awakening, and even got to use two girls with Down syndrome as suicide bombers. The victims were mostly Iraqis opposed to the realm of the ISI or who just held different beliefs.¹⁷

It is important to explain the motives behind the violence of 2007. They not only responded to the strategy of creating a civil war already tested by Al Zarqawi, but

¹⁶ Quoted by: McCants, William: *The ISIS Apocalypse*. Nueva York, St. Martin Press, 2015, pp. 40 and ss.

¹⁷ A good account of the ISIS’ atrocities under Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and al-Masri can be found in: Hosken, Andrew: *Empire of Fear. Inside the Islamic State*. Edinburgh, One World Book, 2015. Pp. 110 and ss.

were based on the core beliefs of the two new leaders of the ISI about the course of time. In fact, their haste to declare the Islamic State even though they did not control any territory yet, was driven by their belief that the return of the *Mahdi* and the apocalypse were near, something which was never believed by the leaders of Al Qaeda. It is quite possible that by reading the thousand pages of the jihadist handbook, *A Call to Global Jihad*, published in 2004 by the Spanish-Syrian Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (better known in Spain as Setmariam), Al Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi were introduced in the prophecies of doomsday. After all, Al-Suri devotes more than a hundred pages of his handbook to the *Book of Tribulations*, written over a thousand years ago by Un'aym bin Hammad.¹⁸

Believing as they did in the “final battle”, it is not surprising that the ISI leaders embarked themselves on a suicidal confrontation with Iraqi forces and the international coalition. This same reason is the only thing that can explain why the current Islamic State was set in the town of Dabiq, north of Aleppo, on Syria's border with Turkey. A village without any strategic importance, unless the prophecies about the end of time are taken into account. Dabiq is where the final battle between Islam and the infidels will be waged between the armies of Medina and Rome. At least according to the words attributed to the prophet Muhammad by his companion Abu Hurayrah.¹⁹

The 2007 terror campaign, which included several British-American military operations, succeeded in significantly reducing the operational capability of the ISI. Thus, when the coalition launched its Phantom Thunder operation in mid-2007, the ISI's members were estimated in 1,000. Phantom Thunder was followed in August 2007 by Phantom Strike, and in January 2008, when the coalition troops launched their third great operation, this time under the name Phantom Phoenix, the goal was to put an end to what little remained of the ISI. The Institute for the

¹⁸ The book can be found here: <http://sunnah.com/muslim/54>

¹⁹ <http://www.theonlyquran.com/hadith/SahihMuslim/?volume=41&chapter=9>

Study of War estimates that the allied troops killed near 3,000 insurgents in those months, of which 400 were high-value targets, and they arrested more than 9,000 jihadists belonging to several groups. Many of them, of course, to the ISI.²⁰

The proof that the coalition considered what they still called Al Qaeda in Iraq as terminated can be easily checked: in January 2007 the US government offered a reward of 5 million dollars to whoever furnished clues to find al-Masri; in mid-2008 that figure had fallen to 100,000 dollars.²¹

With regard to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi there were numerous speculations, most tending to demonstrate his non-existence. It would be the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, who would finally put an end to them. On April 19, 2010, he showed a photo of the leader of the ISI and also of its military leader, Abu Ayyub al-Masri. Both were dead. A week before, ISI's emir of Baghdad, Manaf al-Rahim al-Rawi, had been arrested at a roadblock. Thanks to the information obtained during the interrogation, Iraqi troops were able to determine the location of the house where Abu Omar was hiding, near the city of Tikrit. A few hours before Al-Maliki's press conference, coalition troops raided the house with both ISI leaders inside it, who exploded themselves to avoid being captured.²²

After acknowledging the loss of their two leaders, the ISI announced on May 16, 2010 the appointment of its new spiritual leader, Emir Abu Bakr al-Qurashi al-Hus-

²⁰ Institute for the Study of War: <http://www.understandingwar.org/operation/operationphantomthunder>
<http://www.understandingwar.org/operation/operationphantomstrike>
<http://www.understandingwar.org/operation/operationphantomphoenix>

²¹ Mount, Mike: "Reward for wanted terrorist drops", on CNN: http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/05/13/pentagon.masri.value/index.html?eref=ib_topstories

²² A detailed description of the operation, as well as the press conference, can be found on: The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, May 9, 2010: <http://www.terrorisminfo.org.il/en/articleprint.aspx?id=18118>



“Unfortunately, the American troops left Iraq in late 2010 and early 2011 and the world lost its interest in what was happening there. The ISI lost much of its media coverage, but it also won of audacity and operational capability”

seini al-Baghdadi, and of its new military chief, Allah Abu Suleiman.²³ The organization also called for revenge for the loss of its two dead leaders.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, although he claimed through his names that his lineage descended from the prophet himself,²⁴ was a stranger to most experts on Iraq and even for American and Iraqi intelligence and Al Qaeda itself.²⁵ So much so, that the first biographical notes on this dark character only appeared after the victories of the Islamic State in Iraq in mid-2014.²⁶

Although there’s still a mantle of darkness surrounding the life of the leader of the Islamic State, it seems accepted that he was born in 1971 under the name Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, in Samarra, the son of a religious preacher. Part of his family belonged to Saddam Hussein’s Baath party, and it seems that most of it, including his father, were Salafists followers of the most purist, fundamentalist and revolutionary version of Islam. Al-Baghdadi studied at the University of Islamic

²³ Published by *The New York Times*: “Iraq insurgent names new leaders.” May 16, 2010: [http://atwar.blogs.ny-times.com/2010/05/16/iraqiinsurgentgroupnamesnewleaders/? r=0](http://atwar.blogs.ny-times.com/2010/05/16/iraqiinsurgentgroupnamesnewleaders/?r=0)

²⁴ The leader’s choice of his nom de guerre is not trivial. On top of *Iraqising* his already Iraqi origin, he was claiming to belong to prophet Al-Qurashi’s tribe, an indispensable condition for a Caliph, according to most experts on Islam.

²⁵ Among the documents found in Bin Laden’s home in Abbotabad, there was a letter from Al Qaeda’s leader showing his curiosity over the recently elected ISI leader, who was totally unknown to him.

²⁶ Another instance that proves that he was hardly known is the headline of the British newspaper *The Independent* just one year ago, on 14 November, 2014: “Abu Bakr al Baghdadi profile: The mysterious leader of ISIS and why he is called the invisible sheik”: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middleeast/abubakralbaghdadiprofilethemysteriousleaderofisisandwhyheiscalledtheinvisiblesheikh9849413.html>

Studies at Baghdad, where he graduated in 1996, received his master's degree in 1999, and next joined the doctorate courses in Quranic Studies.

In 2003, Al-Baghdadi helped to create a group called *Jaysh al-Sunna wa-l-Jamaah* (or the Army of the People of the Sunni Community) in order to fight the infidel invaders. He was arrested by chance in Fallujah while visiting a relative in February 2004 and transferred to the detention centre in southern Iraq, Camp Bucca. No authority in the centre suspected that he was a jihadist and allowed him great flexibility in contacts and movements, since he was seen as someone who helped solve the problems of inmates. He was released on December 8, 2004 as he was not considered a dangerous element.²⁷

It is also known that when Al Zarqawi created the Mujahideen *Shura* Council in 2006, Al-Baghdadi and his group joined the organization. Given his religious credentials, he was also charged with the “portfolio” of religious affairs. Nevertheless, he still had time to present and defend his doctoral thesis in Koranic studies.

Iraqi by birth, Abu Bakr was closer to Abu Omar than to al-Masri, a foreigner. This proximity gave him the chance to climb positions within the ISI and become part of the inner circle of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.

When Al-Masri and Abu Omar committed suicide before the raid of their refuge on April 18, 2010, the leader of the military committee of the ISI, Hajji Bakr, whom Abu Bakr had met at Camp Bucca, personally organized the election of the new leader of the group. Since, for security reasons, he could not bring together the members of the Consultative *Shura* Council, Hajji Bakr collected the vote of each of the eleven members and issued a score of nine to two in favour of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.²⁸

²⁷ See his biographical analysis published by Newsweek on 8 December, 2014: <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/12/19/whoisleaderabubakrhalbaghdadi290081.html>

²⁸ McCants, William: *The Believer. How an introvert became the leader of the Islamic State*. Washington, Brookings Institution, 2015, p. 42.

The new leader had their ultimate goal perfectly clear in his mind: the creation of a new Caliphate. However, he did not have enough forces to do so. The ISI was decimated and almost sunk, unable to achieve its goals with the few elements who had not been captured. As General Odierno, commander of US forces in Iraq, said at a press conference on June 5, 2010: in the three-month period we have “either picked up or killed 34 out of the top 42 Al Qaeda in Iraq leaders. They’re clearly now attempting to reorganize themselves. [. . .] They’ve broken.”²⁹ He was so sure of AQI’s defeat though, that he even dared to question the existence of the new leaders of ISI. Odierno was right about one thing: AQI was finished; but he was wrong about ISI, which he did not even mention by its name.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi knew he must necessarily be on the defensive and remain underground, but he was also aware that he needed to carry out attacks in order to continue flying his black flag high and reach new recruits with whom to wage their battle for the Caliphate.

The first attack ordered by the new Al-Baghdadi was against an Iraqi Christian minority: on October 31, 2010, six suicide bombers detonated themselves inside the church of Our Lady of Salvation, in the neighbourhood of Karrada in the Iraqi capital. This attack was criticized by Al Qaeda and Bin Laden, always eager to find popular support for their cause. Unheeding, the ISI continued its campaign of violence against soft targets of the Iraqi security forces and against religious minorities and the Shiite population the rest of that year and throughout 2011.

Unfortunately, the American troops left Iraq in late 2010 and early 2011 and the world lost its interest in what was happening there. Indeed, the ISI lost much of its media coverage, but it also won audacity and operational capability. In 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was able to start moving toward his cherished Caliphate.

²⁹ Press conference of general Raymond T. Odierno, published by *Long war Journal*: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/06/al_qaeda_in_iraq_is3.php

“In 2013, Al-Baghdadi decided to build a new Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. After the hasty departure of US troops from Iraq and the political revenge of its Shiite president, Al-Maliki, violence returned to the streets of cities led by the ISI”



From Iraq to Syria and Back: the Road to the Caliphate

In 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took a strategic decision: building a new Caliphate on the land of Iraq and Syria. After the hasty departure of US troops from Iraq and the political revenge of its Shiite president, Al-Maliki, violence had returned to the streets of cities and the ISI led sectarian attacks; at the same time, neighbouring Syria plunged into the chaos of civil war and precisely that situation entailed a power vacuum that al-Baghdadi seized to exploit it to his advantage.

To strengthen its project in Iraq, the ISI launched what became known as the “breaking the walls” campaign.³⁰ This ISI offensive had several goals. The first, as its name indicated, was breaking into prisons to free arrested jihadists and replenish the ranks of the organization. The first of a series of actions was the assault in September 2012 of four prisons, including Tikrit’s. The most spectacular one, the release of hundreds of prisoners from the Abu Ghraib prison in July 2013. The second goal was to increase the tension between Baghdad and the Kurds, thus initiating a series of attacks on the separation line between the Iraqi government and the autonomous region of Kurdistan. The third objective was to increase civil unrest with explosive devices in and around the capital. The last goal was to terrorize the Shiite population. In fact, in late 2013, the ISI was responsible for nearly 1,000 victims per month.

³⁰ An excellent analysis of this ISI offensive can be found in the publication by the Institute for the Study of War, written by: Lewis, Jessica: *Al Qaeda in Irak resurgent. The breaking then Walls campaign*. Washington, September, 2013.

To a large extent, sectarianism and the inability of President Nuri al-Maliki helped Al-Baghdadi expand his power. As a result of the visible discrimination carried out by the Government against the Sunni minority, several protests had been organised, especially along the province of Anbar. One source of rebellion was the town of Hawija, southwest of Kirkuk, in northern Iraq. There, on April 23, 2013, government forces, in their effort to end the protest, left a real bloodbath behind them. Months later, in December, the ISI killed the commander who orchestrated the massacre, General Muhammed al-Karawi. And in response to this assassination, Al-Maliki ordered the violent assault of another source of protest, this time in Ramadi. With these types of actions and reactions, plus a good diplomacy on his part, Al-Baghdadi was able to win the support of major Sunni tribes, the same who had recently abandoned his predecessors. Only now they no longer had confidence in the Shiite government in Baghdad or in the Americans, who had already left the country.

The ISI had once again followers, militants, money and a growing audience. So much so that in January 2014 they published a report of activities under the name of *Al-Naba*, where they gave the numbers of their deadly activities.³¹ It should not come as a surprise when on January 14, 2014, al-Baghdadi's forces gathered the audacity to raise their black flag, the flag of the Prophet, in the government building of Fallujah, while they seized parts of Ramadi, capital of Anbar. Once they had the two cities under control they even dared to declare the Islamic State, although after their withdrawal, everything was forgotten in just a few days. At least Westerners did, despite this being a rehearsal of what would befall months later.³²

³¹ See, for instance, *The Telegraph*: "ISIS annual report breaks down its bloody record", 18 June, 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10908559/Isisannualreportbreaksdown-itsbloodyrecord.html>

³² See: Warrick, Joby: *Black Flags: The rise of ISIS*. New York, Double Day, 2015.

But the ISI had much more than a growing success in Iraq. It was also imposing itself in neighbouring Syria, where, as it hurtled toward civil war, Al-Baghdadi set his eyes.

Already in mid-2011 he had sent eight of his men to Syria under the leadership of Abu Mohamed al-Jawlani, a young Syrian who had placed himself under his command in Iraq, to establish a mission in support of combatants against Bashar al Asad. Al-Jawlani would create a group of combatants under his command called *Jabhat al-Nusra ash-Sham* (Support Front for the People of Levant). The name did not circulate until January 2012, six months after the arrival in Syria of the ISI militants, and although they would already have committed some suicide attacks, it would not be until mid-2012 when they began to claim responsibility for their attacks, as happened with the car bomb against Al Asad's intelligence headquarters in Damascus on August 27, 2012.³³

Military training and combat experience in Iraq, as well as other factors by no means negligible (as the lack of interest of the regime of Damascus in fighting radical Islamists to concentrate their military efforts on the rebels, who were themselves acceptable to the world) favoured the spectacular growth of Al Nusra which, practically overnight, from having about 200 militants in mid-2012 suddenly became the main opposition to Al-Asad. Al Nusra had been publicly blessed by Bin Laden's successor at the head of Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, through a statement broadcasted by Al Jazeera.³⁴

The most effective strike by Al Nusra occurred in March 2013 when its members seized effective control of the city of Al Raqa. The conquest of the city rep-

³³ To read an introduction on Al Nusra in Syria please read: Paoli, Bruno & Burgat, François: *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie*. Paris, La Découverte, December, 2013.

³⁴ See: The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center: "The Al-Nusra Front is an Al Qaeda Salafist Jihadi Network", 23 September, 2013. http://www.terrorisminfo.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20573/E_076_13_1861409435.pdf



“Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would formally declare on April 2013 the abolition of both the ISI and Al Nusra and the creation of a single entity: the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)”

resented a major victory for the jihadists, who now dominated land and a large population.

This would be so important that even Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself would travel to Syria to see the success of Al Nusra live and, above all, to set that organization under his direct control. In fact, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would formally declare on April 9, 2013 the abolition of both the ISI and Al Nusra and the creation of a single entity under the name *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa-al Sham* (or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIS or ISIL).

However, the next day, the leader of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, Al-Jawlani, denied news of the merger, declared to be against such a merger and, moreover, offered his allegiance to the leader of Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The latter, possibly hidden in some secluded part of Pakistan and with little capability to influence events in the Levant, tried to serve as a Solomonic mediator between his two theoretical followers, but with a slight prejudice in favour of the Syrian over the Iraqi, whose sectarian violence did not cease to cause him problems. Al-Zawahiri's decision was not accepting the creation of the ISIS and asked each group to continue acting separately in each of their countries. Moreover, he warned Al-Baghdadi that his position as emir in Iraq would be reviewed after one year.³⁵

As expected, the ISI leader flatly rejected Al-Zawahiri's stance, remaining steadfast in their new acronym ISIS and cautioning against a Jihadist excision. Inter-

³⁵ See: Institute for the Study of War, Szybala, Valerie: “Al Qaeda shows its true colors in Syria”. 1 August, 2013.

estingly, the creator of ISIS criticized the fact that Al-Zawahiri was defending some artificial boundaries that had been drawn by the colonial powers and that did not correspond to the *Ummah*.

To confront the looming schism which did not suit the cause of Al Qaeda, Al-Zawahiri appointed one of his trusted men, the Syrian-Spanish Abu Khalid al-Suri, as mediator on the ground to resolve this dispute. Al Suri, imprisoned in Syria, had been released by the jihadist amnesty granted by Bashar al-Assad in 2011, in order to instil fear in Western governments. Those faithful to the brand new ISIS not only did not accept his mediation, but threatened to kill him, which they indeed did early in 2014, on 22 February, a few weeks after al-Zawahiri repudiated his relationship with the ISIS.

Once the rupture was consummated, the ISIS embarked on a plan to murder the leaders of both the Nusra Front and other rebel groups to Al-Assad. At the same time, it imposed its control as the opposing rebels got out of the way. Seemingly overnight, Al Raqqa's control passed into the hands of the ISIS in April 2013. With a good media campaign and highlighting an image of being invincible and a winner, hundreds of combatants of Al Nusra and other groups deserted their posts to join the ranks of ISIS. Emirs of important centres such as Ad Dana, Aleppo, Jarabulus, Manjib or Tal Abyad, until then faithful to Al Nusra, hoisted the black flag of ISIS. Within weeks, al-Baghdadi had control of part of his Caliphate project.

Exhausted by his battles against the forces of Al-Assad, beheaded by the ISIS' militiamen, or truly attracted to Al-Baghdadi's project, Syrian rebel groups started being unable to stop the advance of ISIS.

Under the impunity of the regime in Damascus, the ISIS was able to effectively fight non-jihadist rebels and Al Nusra. In Iraq, through a partnership with the military of Saddam Hussein's period, particularly the organization of his deputy, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, the *Jaysh Rijal an at-Tariqa Naqshabandiya* (or Army of the Men of



“Exhausted by his battles against the forces of Al-Assad, beheaded by the ISIS’ militiamen or truly attracted by the ISIS, Syrian rebels were unable to stop the advance of the Islamic State”

the Naqshbandi Order), it was able to sophisticate its military strategy while also approaching the tribes. All this also fed the victorious image of the ISIS in Syria resulting in the pledge of obedience of very relevant tribes, such as the Afadila tribe.

Not surprisingly, imbued with a clear sense of victory, Al-Baghdadi ordered his followers to march from Syria to Iraq, erasing in passing the boundaries set by the SykesPicot agreement a hundred years before. In fact, the ISIS flooded all its social networks with pictures of bulldozers literally erasing the borders between Syria and Iraq as a symbol of the destruction of the old territorial order and the announcement of a new one.³⁶

In February 2014 the CIA estimated that the ISIS had about 10,000 members; in June the figure rose to 15,000, an estimate that would increase again two months later. As it was, on June 6, 2014, Al-Baghdadi’s followers, penetrated quick as lightning into Iraqi territory and reached the gates of the second largest city in Iraq, Mosul, with a population estimated at around two million people. The city was defended by the Second Division of the Iraqi Army, trained and equipped by the United States for years. The first line of defence consisted of the 6th Brigade and had 2,500 soldiers. Within hours, all had defected leaving behind their uniforms and weapons. 10,000 soldiers and policemen, doing the same as their com-

³⁶ *The Guardian*, among many others: “ISIS breach of Iraq-Syria border merges two wars into one ‘nightmarish reality’”, 18 June, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/18/isisiraqsyriatwowarsonenightmare>

manders and generals had done, simply left the people to fend for themselves because they had refused to oppose a few hundred militiamen of the ISIS. In less than three days, ISIS' black flags fluttered throughout the city.

But things became even worse, Al-Baghdadi ordered further progress towards Baghdad and Tikrit fell like Mosul. And with it, Speicher base Camp fell too, riddled with war material that passed on to the hands of the ISIS insurgents. Other cities would follow the same fate, including Diala and later Ramadi.

In late June, on the 29, with the Iraqi army practically disbanded, the ISIS' spokesman, Mumahed Nasir al-Din al-Adnani, declared the change of name from ISIS to Islamic State and simultaneously announced the establishment of the Caliphate. He even released an official document in several languages under the title *This is the Promise of Allah*.³⁷ The text includes things like:

"The sun of jihad has risen. [. . .] Triumph looms on the horizon. The signs of victory have appeared. Here the flag of the Islamic State rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala. Beneath it, the walls of the *taw gh t* (rulers claiming the rights of Allah) have been demolished, their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed. It is a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim believer. It is a hope that flutters in the heart of every *muj hid muwahhid* (monotheist). It is the *khil fah* – the abandoned obligation of the era. Now the *khil fah* has returned."

Days later, on July 4, all dressed in black, as prescribed by Salafist canons, Abu Bkr al-Baghdadi entered the Mosul mosque to deliver his first sermon as Caliph. It must be said in his honour, that the imam of the mosque, Mohamed al-Mansouri, who had refused to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State two days earlier, had already been duly executed.

³⁷ The document can be read in English in: https://ia902505.us.archive.org/28/items/poa_25984/EN.pdf



“In late June 2014, with the Iraqi army practically disbanded, the ISIS’ spokesman declared the change of name to Islamic State and announced the establishment of the Caliphate”

The speech of Al-Baghdadi did no more than reflect in theocratic terms (fear of Allah) the reality that had been created: control of about 80,000 square kilometres of territory, over a population of more than six million people and an army marching to victory.³⁸ Thus commenced the account of the Islamic State.

³⁸ The video and English subtitles of Al Baghdadi’s sermon can be found on Al Arabiya News: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/webtv/reports/2014/07/07/ISISAbuBakralBaghdidifirstFridaysermonassocalled-Caliph.html>