



STRATEGIC FILE

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Wojciech Lorenz (Managing Editor)
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Ignore Them at Your Peril: The (Missing?) Strategic Narrative of ISIS

Kacper Rękawek

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is an organisation that is often misunderstood. Usually, it is seen as a barbaric and terrorist cult intent on acts of extreme violence, and an entity focused on achieving global objectives. At the same time, it presents itself as an opportunistic entity and is clearly telling us what its plans are as it attempts to transform itself away from a local and regional group, preoccupied with Iraq, Syria and the Arabian Peninsula, and is assured of its ongoing growth potential. The West and the anti-ISIS coalition should take stock of the ISIS strategic narrative, which in the past was too often disregarded, refrain from utilising quick fixes in combating the organisation, and prioritise denying it its growth opportunities.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is an entity that attracts worldwide attention and is seen as one of the primary security threats of the modern world.¹ Unfortunately, the organisation's roots, goals and narration is misunderstood, and many analysts, commentators and experts, sometimes with rudimentary knowledge of this organisation, focus less on the content of its messages than on the style in which these are presented. Each and every spectacular violent and gruesome deed performed by the likes of "Jihadi John," the British executioner of ISIS' Western hostages, reinforces this practice and helps the organisation terrify the Western public with its seemingly novel, unprecedented and unexpected actions. In reality, however, the situation is markedly different, as ISIS, an entity with a history stretching back to at least 2004, has been showing consistency in its messaging strategy, and in the development of a coherent strategic narrative, broadly understood as a narration that it puts forward to convince itself and its followers and sympathisers of its righteousness and legitimacy. Looking back at the messages of its leadership in 2006–2015 provides us with a plethora of clarifications and clues as to where it is coming from and where it is heading as a political phenomenon. Ignoring the content of these is hardly a luxury the West can afford, especially in the light of the organisation's seemingly surprising expansion in 2013–2014.

ISIS Misunderstood and the Unintended Consequences

ISIS is often regarded—and portrayed in Western media—as a deviant, mindless throwback to a medieval past, apocalyptically bent on spectacular acts of destruction and murder. Its coverage focuses on beheadings and other executions, such as public crucifixion and throwing gay men off the tops of buildings. While reporting these, media zoom in on the fate and deeds of the non-Iraqi and generally non-Arab members of the organisation, and attempt to analyse what made young Western men, and women, join such a barbarian outfit. Simultaneously, ISIS' extremely conservative morality, often brutally imposed upon populations

¹ See, for example, B. Klich, "The West towards the Crescent of Fire," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2014, pp. 153–155.

inhabiting territory controlled by the organisation, also attracts a lot of attention as the viewers are faced with stories of the harshness of its religious police, who make sure everyone attends prayers at a mosque in their locality. Alternatively, a popular narrative asserts that barbarian ISIS wishes to raze to the ground all ancient ruins, and destroy all “non-Islamic” artefacts. Again, these acts of seemingly wanton destruction reinforce the connection between ISIS and the initial, as far as popular culture and mass media are concerned, barbarians—the Taliban who, in an iconic and self-defeating act, destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan.

Such a perception of ISIS had direct political consequences for those opposing it directly (the Middle Eastern states that border or are in the vicinity of the territories held by the organisation), and for the West, where ISIS inspired terrorist plots and thousands of these countries’ citizens to travel to Syria. So far, the international response to this menace has focused on the internationalisation of the struggle with the organisation. All concerned countries were effectively rallied into an ad hoc coalition, which, unfortunately, fails to fulfil its hastily assembled role, as it is again dominated by the likes of the U.S., and not the Middle Eastern states. The latter are loath to be cast in the role of Western stooges but are simultaneously happy to sit back and allow the U.S. or the broader West to do the dirty, anti-ISIS work for them. This creates a dangerous dynamic, as those less directly threatened by the organisation seem to be the most involved in fighting it in Iraq and Syria. At the same time, ISIS is quite clearly informing the global audience what its priorities are, and who plays the role of its main and immediate enemy. Before the ad hoc coalition, the dysfunctionality of which was exposed at the meeting of its members in Paris in early June 2015,² makes further decisions as to who bears the brunt of fighting ISIS and what measures should be used in this effort, it must study the adversary’s plans and intentions. Only then will it be able to formulate a coherent anti-ISIS strategy, because, at the moment, it is fighting its own perception of the organisation and not the organisation itself.

What ISIS Says ...

It is up to the senior leadership of ISIS to shape the narrative of the organisation, and quite often they give us many clues as to what their thinking, their priorities and their plans for the future are. In this sense, the summer of 2014, days after the announcement of the “Islamic State” or a “caliphate” by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is telling.³ The message included his announcement to the world on the dawning of a new “era,” in which the rejuvenated *ummah* (community) of Islam will “stand up and rise” and “free [itself] from the shackles of weakness, and stand in the face of tyranny, against the treacherous rulers—the agents of the crusaders and the atheists, and the guards of the Jews.” His ISIS is meant to be an agent for the dawn of this “era,” and to play the role of “heavy boots ... that will trample the idol of nationalism, destroy the idol of democracy and uncover its deviant nature.” Al-Baghdadi’s message is symbolic not solely because that it was his first as the newly chosen “caliph,” but also due to the fact that it includes three key and long-running elements prominent in his organisation’s strategic narrative, i.e., (1) the intention to inform the world of its future plans (“heavy boots” trampling the “idols”), (2) the conviction of its potential for growth (a new “era” dawning in the aftermath of the alleged reinstatement of the “caliphate”), which is interlinked with the third component, (3) its desire to transform from a local into a global entity (through *ummah* “standing up” and endorsing ISIS).

1) We Tell You What We Are Going to Do

ISIS has a very specific track record in terms of telling the world what it is planning to do. This was clearly evident in messages announcing its Iraq campaigns on “breaking the walls,” i.e., attacking different prisons and freeing the organisation’s cadre from incarceration (2012), and “soldiers’ harvest,” i.e., targeting and intimidation of the members of the Iraqi security forces who inhabited Sunni areas of this country (2013).⁴ These two campaigns allowed the organisation to replenish its ranks and undermine the state’s authority

² A.J. Rubin, “Anti-ISIS Coalition Makes Little Progress at Paris Meeting,” *The New York Times*, 2 June 2015.

³ See: <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html> for the message’s content.

⁴ See: J.D. Lewis, “Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent,” *Middle East Security Report*, 14, September 2013, www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf.

throughout Iraq, and then to consolidate its hold on territory in which Iraqi security personnel were not present.

Such activities/campaigns are in line with a five-stage plan publically announced by ISIS on the establishment of the caliphate, which includes the following phases: *hijrah* (migration to “a place where they [Muslims] could operate without the threat of a powerful police state,” i.e., ISIS sympathisers from all around the world flocking to the territory it holds), establishment of *jama’ah* (community) in this “place” (i.e., moulding this transnational array of supporters into a coherent entity), this community’s rebellion (i.e., taking up arms and confrontation with enemy, Iraqi or Syrian, forces), consolidation (i.e., defence of territory this community is able to hold) and, finally, establishment of the caliphate.⁵ The aforementioned campaigns allowed the organisation first to “rebel,” while undermining Iraq’s authority via attacks on prisons, and then to “consolidate,” via eradication of the state’s authority from areas of interest to ISIS.

It is worth noting that these two campaigns were followed by the notional re-establishment of the caliphate (the fifth phase in the aforementioned five-stage plan) in the early summer of 2014. Almost nine years earlier (in 2005), Ayman al-Zawahiri, then the deputy leader of Al-Qaeda, asked Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and a predecessor of ISIS, to “establish an Islamic authority or emirate, then develop it and support it until it achieves the level of a caliphate—over as much territory as you can to spread its power in Iraq.”⁶ Thus ISIS’ spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, is hardly off the mark when he asks the world if it is “surprised” by his organisation’s subsequent actions as it carries out a well-articulated and prepared plan.⁷

Of course, the extent of its success in carrying out at least parts of this plan seems overwhelming. However, ISIS is pretty open about the fact that it is an opportunistic organisation that is keen on making the most of available opportunities.⁸ Its history is full of opportunistic gambits, which catapulted it to its global prominence. Examples include the replenishment of the ranks with former Baathists (2010–2011) who remained in rebellion vis-à-vis the post-2003 Iraqi political order, the recommencement of offensive actions in Iraq in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal (2012), the initial dispatch of fighters to Syria, who laid the foundation for the establishment of ISIS in that country (2011–2012), and the takeover of Mosul in the face of the meltdown of the Iraqi military (2014), where up to 30 000 Iraqi security forces failed to protect this city during an offensive by an ISIS force of approximately 1 000. Such successful opportunism allows the organisation to constantly reinforce the rhetoric of the imminent victory that is within reach.

2) *Today Medina, Tomorrow the World?*

In November 2014 ISIS released a new message by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in which he spent some time threatening Saudi Arabia and its rulers.⁹ No international jihadi movement can avoid the topic of the country controlling two of Islam’s three most holy sites, i.e., Mecca and Medina. These have not only symbolic meaning to ISIS, an entity intent on reviving the “true faith,” also via controlling its historic and symbolic spots. They are also of political importance, as conquering them forms the next phases of the al-Zawahiri plan for AQI from 2005, i.e., expansion beyond Iraq (e.g., into Saudi Arabia) and then confrontation with Israel. Moreover, utilisation of the “Medina” narrative, the place to which the Prophet Mohammed migrated (the original *hijrah*), and in which he was at first surrounded by relatively few Muslims, helps ISIS to deflect arguments regarding its relative unpopularity in the Muslim world, or about its far from all-encompassing control of Iraq or Syria. Its spokesmen attempt to present their current day positions in comparison to that of the Prophet in the early seventh century, when hardly anyone could have guessed that the small Muslim community in Medina would expand to include more than 1.5 billion people worldwide.¹⁰

⁵ See: “From Hijrah to Khilafah,” *Dabiq*, iss. 1, <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/09-2014/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-1-the-return-of-khilafah.pdf>.

⁶ See: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf> for the contents of that letter.

⁷ See: <https://justpaste.it/iyya> for the collection of al-Adnani’s speeches and messages.

⁸ See: Abu Hamza al-Mujahir, “Advice for the Leaders of the Islamist State,” *Dabiq*, iss. 7, <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/islamic-state-dabiq-magazine-issue-7-from-hypocrisy-to-apostasy.pdf>, p. 14.

⁹ See: <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/11/14/audio-message-by-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-even-if-the-disbelievers-despise-such/> for the content of this (“Even If the Disbelievers Despise Such”) message.

¹⁰ See: <https://justpaste.it/iyya>.

Drawing comparisons with Islam's prophet could seem hubristic, but it is in fact an element of a well-known strategy in narration developed by Islamist extremists.¹¹ They utilise “master narratives” derived from religious archetypes established in Islam's sacred texts or cultural imagination, and then apply them to 21st century reality. Thus an apostate ruler can be called a “pharaoh,” and an invading non-Muslim forces termed “crusaders.” The “Medina” narrative testifies that ISIS is still a work in progress, or a society-building project in relatively nascent stages, and justifies its slogan of “remaining and expanding,” a process that was supposed to have started shortly after the foundation of ISIS in 2006.

An expansionist attitude allows the organisation to market itself as a “different” or a “new” state—some termed it an example of “fourth generation governance.”¹² ISIS might have a tenuous grip on its territory and citizens, and possess a seemingly rudimentary government, and no international recognition, but its local presence would not differ much from that of other regimes allegedly controlling territories in the Muslim or Arab world. In short, ISIS thrives on the neglect of the Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria, and in terms of the quality of governance its offer for its “inhabitants” is not different from, or is even better than, that of Hussein's Iraq or Assad's Syria.¹³ Even if ISIS' socio-governance offer is found lacking, it can always revert to the position of “expansion” and new oaths of allegiance, or to the fact that it successfully “remains,” i.e., exists, even if only “in the desert.”¹⁴

3) *Going Global without Becoming AQ?*

As ISIS uses the “Medina” narrative to herald its future growth, its leaders and spokesmen shift the content of the organisation's focus away from “local” and towards “global.” This process is not yet complete, but the uneasy coexistence of these two orientations is visible throughout the whole history of its strategic narrative. This is especially prominent in ISIS' prioritisation of its enemies.

Al-Baghdadi's organisation is, despite its civilian facade, a paramilitary organisation, the main job of which is fighting its real or imaginary enemies. These are plentiful, and include all those who challenge or remain neutral vis-à-vis “the state.” ISIS proclaims that there is “no gray zone” in the conflict, it is purely a clash of black and white, with “Jews,” “crusaders” (Europeans and/or Americans), “nusayris” (Alawites), “rafidah” (rejectors, i.e., Shiites) and “Safavids” (Iranians) in the forefront of the enemy camp.¹⁵ These are flexible categories and could be extended, as ISIS is also prominently targeting the “apostates,” i.e., those who abandoned religion, or “disbelievers.” This practice, aimed at other Sunnis—nationalists, communists, Baathists, and so on, amounts to ISIS giving itself the right to excommunicate Muslims (*takfir*) arbitrarily, regardless of the opinion of the *ulema* (elite religious scholars).¹⁶

With such broad targets for its violence, ISIS seemingly stands at a crossroads on the question of whether it should focus on the “local” or the “global.” The name of ISIS indicates an organisation closely connected with the localities in which it was operating. However, shortly after its inception it also used the name of “Islamic State in Iraq,” suggesting it could and perhaps would grow out of its Iraqi zone of influence, and become, in line with al-Zawahiri's recommendation, a proto-caliphate. Nonetheless, the pre-2010 strategic narrative was very much Iraq focused, i.e., it often included detailed critiques of reality in an “occupied” country and discussed the behaviour of Sunni politicians in Baghdad, and their complicity in establishment of a “rafidah” or “Safavid” led state.¹⁷ A shift towards a more globalised ISIS came after 2011, with the new spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, a Syrian who not only spoke of his organisation's defence of the Sunnis, but stressed that its battle was “everywhere.”¹⁸ Such pronouncements came on top of those indicating that ISIS took its chance to grow because “it had the ability.” This ability allowed al-Adnani to

¹¹ J.R. Halverson, H.L. Goodall, Jr., S.R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, p. 184.

¹² B. Fishman, “Fourth Generation Governance: Sheikh Tamimi Defends the Islamic State of Iraq,” 23 March 2007, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/ISI-Fourth_Gen4.pdf.

¹³ See: <https://twitter.com/charliewinter/status/591544020700110850> for an advertisement of its health service.

¹⁴ See: Bunzel, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁵ See: note 6.

¹⁶ Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, “Say I am on clear proof from my Lord,” https://pietervanostaeyen.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/say_i_am_on_clear_proof_from_my_lord-englishwww-islamicline-com.pdf.

¹⁷ See: https://archive.org/download/Dwla_Nokhba/mjdawl.doc for the collection of transcript of ISI leadership speeches from 2006–2010 period.

¹⁸ See: note 6.

threaten the sack of Rome and call for attacks in the West, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi implored “soldiers of the Islamic state” to “rescue” their “brothers all over the world.”¹⁹

Nonetheless, throughout its history, and in its strategic narrative, ISIS has consistently demonstrated a preference for fighting “local” battles, or for striking the “near enemy” rather than the “far enemy.” Before 2010 this amounted to its leaders spending a lot of time asking other anti-U.S. and anti-Iraqi government Sunni rebels to join them in their fight with “rafidah” (Shiites),²⁰ and, interestingly enough, this hardly changed after 2014, as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi still orders his followers to first fight the Shiites, then the al-Saud family of Saudi Arabia, and then “crusaders,” and “their bases” (Americans and their allies).²¹

Ironically, one of the key “local” battles the organisation had to fight, the rationalisation of which consumed a good deal of its strategic narrative, was the civil war with its mother organisation, AQ. The rupture with this organisation was not only pushed to the fore in ISIS pronouncements and propaganda during the actual break with AQ in early 2013 (completed in February 2014),²² but also in its aftermath, as al-Baghdadi’s organisation still attempts to effectively rewrite the history of global jihadism by selectively claiming certain past AQ figures as its own.

In the eyes of ISIS, AQ allegedly stands for “compromise” and attempts to curry favour with proponents of the so-called “Arab Spring.” It softens its message and realigns its aims while trying to remain relevant in the post-2011 Arab world. At the same time, it is just an “organisation,” an entity that is to remain subordinate to a “state,” i.e., that created by ISIS.²³

Interestingly enough, while “local” ISIS dismisses AQ, a globally oriented entity, it also competes with al-Zawahiri’s organisation, and consequently it is forced to devote an increasing amount of space to the “global” in its narrative. As far as it is concerned, this rivalry for the global audience suits ISIS’ expansionist vision. The multilingual claims of “this is your state,” and its continuing “expansion,” coupled with calls for *hijrah* and photos from its “provinces,” attempt to depict a growing and transnational operation in the making. After the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, the organisation shed its defensive narrative outlook (fighting “occupiers,” “crusaders,” etc.) and opted for an offensive international outlook (“smash Sykes-Picot,” i.e., destroy Middle Eastern artificial borders and focus on the creation of a state of our own and of your dreams).²⁴ This helped to create an image of an entity that is constantly progressing, moving, learning and evolving—in contrast with, e.g., the static and ineffectual AQ.

What the Adversaries of ISIS Should Be Doing

ISIS is an organisation that is clearly telling the world what it is going to do in the near and distant future. It is focusing on expansion, be it via new oaths of loyalty or *hijrah*, and is convinced of its huge growth potential. Simultaneously, it also lowers the bar, narration-wise, as to what constitutes its success, and aims to entrench the narrative of a dynamic, energetic and ever growing, and unstoppable entity. Finally, ISIS, which for now the West mostly associates with gruesome local deeds but global ambitions, is an organisation more focused on and preoccupied with “regional,” if not outright “local” agenda and issues.

At the same time, the broader West, which is not an immediate target of ISIS, rushes to quick fixes and makes ill-advised judgements on the organisation. One needs to remember that, whatever the West does, it will come across, given its low credibility in the Middle East, as imperialist or post-colonial meddling. In such conditions, the Western members of the coalition should not necessarily prioritise or fetishise the coalition, but focus on reversing ISIS’ narrative and use the fact that this is an opportunistic organisation. In short, the West should not focus on constructing any counter-narrative, as it will be disregarded by the Muslim or Arab public, but should prioritise denying ISIS the “opportunities” of which it is so fond. This entails the ongoing, to an extent indefinite, commitment to strengthening the capacity of the Iraqi military

¹⁹ See: note 2.

²⁰ See: note 18.

²¹ See: note 9.

²² L. Sly, “Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, 3 February 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html.

²³ See: note 6.

²⁴ See “The End of Sykes-Picot,” ISIS video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i357G1HuFcl>.

(which can no longer be excused for running away from the enemy) or the Kurdish forces (able to block ISIS' expansion to the north-east). At the same time, if ISIS is about "remaining and expanding," than the West, covertly and in conjunction with the local allies, should arrest this narrative by utilising hybrid warfare against the organisation in territories over which it often enjoys only superficial control. This could see the use of non-Iraqi, primarily Middle Eastern, special forces behind ISIS lines, which would undermine not only the organisation's hold over its territory but also its narrative of "remaining and expanding." Such activities would block the "consolidation" phase of ISIS' five point plan, and render the "Medina" narrative null and void, as the organisation would not be able to achieve any growth. In this respect, the experiences of the U.S. Special Forces in fighting early incarnations of ISIS during the Iraq War, could prove extremely useful and might be re-utilised while combating the jihadist menace.

ISIS' focus on the "near enemy" is also informative for anyone who wants to oppose it. For this reason, the West should also prioritise assisting the security sectors (via the provision of arms and training) of countries directly threatened by its expansion, i.e., Lebanon and Jordan. Simultaneously, ISIS' distant "provinces," in e.g. Egypt or Libya should be denied the space for growth, and the international community must assist counterterrorism in the affected countries, at the same time pressing for maintenance of democratic and rule of law standards in their implementation, to ensure that there is no space for ISIS "expansion" anywhere in the region. The arrest of this expansion will, however, not limit the growth of ISIS, as Western countries must do their utmost to stop, either via preventive or repressive measures, the flow of migrants performing their *hijrah* to ISIS held territory. Stemming this tide undermines another element of ISIS' *raison d'être*.

As has been shown, ISIS gives its adversaries a lot of clues as to how it could be stopped. One should not forget that, for the better part of the last decade, it had already been forgotten. Next time, the international community should not ignore ISIS, as it only does so at its own peril.