

Shock and awe? An examination of the terrorist group ISIL and its future prospects

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Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) leapt to public prominence when the Iraqi city of Mosul fell to its forces in 2014, demonstrating a spectacular military success for ISIL but also being portrayed as a strategic shock to the West.¹ However, rather than reinforcing this 'strategic shock' narrative, this article will argue a countervailing view that ISIL did not emerge spontaneously but rather over the preceding decade as a consequence of the broader 'war on terrorism', the failure of the Arab Spring and the alienation of Sunni populations in Iraq.

Over the course of its evolution, despite changing names and affiliations, ISIL's activities have generally been oriented towards achieving a Sunni Islamic caliphate. In particular, ISIL's success has been relatively unique in the sense that it has asserted (and proven capable of defending) a territorial claim. Western strategy against ISIL has typically focused on containment, using airstrikes and 'advise and assist' mentoring teams. However, ISIL's skilful and extensive use of media operations has allowed the group to

achieve disproportionate influence relative to other groups. Its methodology has led to a high influx of foreign fighters and local acts of terrorism inspired by a so-called 'self-radicalisation' process driven by ISIL propaganda.

This article does not contend that ISIL presents an existential threat to Australia's national security; indeed, it acknowledges that other challenges, such as the re-emergence of China as a major power, are far more pressing in the strategic domain. However, it will be argued that ISIL does present a significant security threat to Australian interests, a view echoed by the Australian Government in the *2016 Defence White Paper*, which asserted that:

[A] major threat ... [Australia] is currently facing is from violent extremism perpetrated or motivated by terrorist groups such as Daesh, al-Qa'ida and others that claim to act in the name of Islam. The anti-Western narrative of terrorists means that Australians will continue to be targeted at home and abroad.²



Clearly, a comprehensive examination of every aspect of ISIL is beyond the scope of this article. Accordingly, it focuses on three key stages of ISIL: its emergence as a terrorist group, its evolution, and its future prospects. Each of these areas will be examined with a selection of critical elements analysed in depth. The analysis concludes that while ISIL's fortunes have ebbed and flowed, generally the group has proven resilient, is capable of learning and adapting quickly, and is likely to maintain a competitive advantage over other groups for a considerable period.

Emergence

In describing ISIL's emergence, several elements will be examined; first, ISIL's declaration as a terrorist organisation; second, the history of religiously-motivated terrorism; third, a summary of the influence of ISIL's founder and his affiliations with other groups; and fourth, the group's fractious relationship with al-Qa'ida.

While ISIL rose to public prominence in 2014, its antecedents can be traced back well into the preceding decade. In 2013, the Australian Government, mirroring other nations, listed ISIL as a terrorist organisation under the *Criminal Code Act (Commonwealth) 1995*, based on it being 'one of the world's deadliest and most active terrorist organisations [which] conducts daily attacks on security forces and civilians'.³ The proclamation noted also that ISIL adheres to a global jihadist ideology and, in so doing, prepares, plans, assists and fosters terrorist acts with the aim of establishing a Salafist-orientated Islamic State spanning Iraq, Syria and the Levant.

Significantly, in making this listing, the Australian Government described previous determinations relating to the group, including the listing of pre-cursor groups such as *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* (Al-Qa'ida in Iraq [AQI]) in 2005, and later *Dawla al-Islamiya (Islamic State) in 2014*.⁴ These name changes, which will be explored shortly, reflect changes in the group's operating area and its aspirations for an Islamic caliphate.

ISIL is certainly not the first group to invoke religion as a catalyst for political change. ISIL follows the practice of a multitude of organisations and individuals, such as the Sikh Khalistani movement in India, the Catholic Irish Republican

Army and the ultra-Christian Timothy McVeigh in the Oklahoma bombing.⁵ Similarly, groups such as the Islamic *Kharijites* of the 7th century and, more recently, the Muslim Brotherhood—established in 1928 and with a presence in over 70 countries—invoke religion in their goals to restore a fundamentalist version of Islam and establish a caliphate for Muslims.⁶ This article asserts that ISIL's deliberate leveraging of religion for political power has been essential to its emergence and has, in the Clausewitzian sense, provided the group with its 'centre of gravity' from which it has drawn strength and inflamed the passions of the people.⁷

Clearly, the role of a terrorist organisation's founder is important, and ISIL is no different. The group's founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was born in Jordan, where he was involved in criminal groups, before joining the group *Tablighi Jamaat*. It was here, in 1989, that his tactical ability and ruthlessness was recognised while fighting Soviet forces (and other local factions) in Afghanistan.⁸ Following these exploits, he returned to Jordan where he joined *Jund al Sham* and undertook a number of operations before being captured by Jordanian authorities. During his incarceration, he became further indoctrinated in jihadi views and adopted a strict application of Sharia law.⁹ Following his release in 1999, he flew to Afghanistan (via Pakistan) following an unsuccessful bombing planned at the Jordanian Radisson Hotel.¹⁰

Central to ISIL's overall philosophical approach was al-Zarqawi's personal beliefs. He had been strongly influenced by the teachings of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Wahhab, who lived in the 17th century, argued for an interpretation of the Quran that aimed to restore the 'purity of Islam in Arabia ... [and which] violently suppress[ed] all Arab Muslims who resisted his fundamentalist version of Islam'.¹¹ These Wahhabi-inspired practices would see ISIL targeting Shi'a Muslims, a practice that would encourage sectarian killings and ultimately pit ISIL against al-Qa'ida's strategic direction.¹²

Al-Zarqawi initially affiliated himself with al-Qa'ida—including meeting with and receiving funding from Osama bin Laden to establish training camps—before fighting alongside al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan.¹³ In anticipation of US-led operations, Al-Zarqawi travelled to Iraq and

commenced preparations for insurgency-based activities. He renamed his group *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* (AQI) and swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden.¹⁴ AQI's stated aims were to create an insurgency to topple the Iraqi government, kill regime collaborators, target Shi'a civilians and establish an Islamic state.¹⁵

While many similarities exist between al-Qa'ida's general Salafist/Wahhabist approach and that of AQI, the latter adopted a more austere Hanbalist Salafi interpretation, wherein AQI believed that only Sunni Muslims were true Muslims and hence gravitated towards sectarian violence.¹⁶ This philosophy saw Shi'a being considered subject to *takfir* (subject to death) and legitimised them as targets.¹⁷ Al-Zarqawi's methodology differed from the broader al-Qa'ida approach in that it deliberately targeted Shi'a Muslims and sought to exploit social media far more effectively than al-Qa'ida.

A contributing factor to the emergence of ISIL lay in Western strategy itself, being the application of a 'disaggregation' policy, which sought to break the 'global jihad' franchise into smaller localised issues.¹⁸ The policy, while initially successful, later proved to be ineffective in the sense that it treated every insurgency as a localised issue, and led to strategic dissonance with differing (and often contradictory) narratives regarding the global war on terror.¹⁹

Such dissonance led to inconsistent messaging to counter what was a 'global jihad' franchise system and to strategically short-sighted decisions, such as the decision to invade Iraq itself and a failure to appreciate (or commit) the requisite forces needed to maintain law and order in Iraq. An exemplar of this dissonance can be found in the Iraqi Provincial Authority's decision to reduce the influence of the prominent Bath party from the Iraqi government, which further degraded the Iraqi indigenous capacity not only in the security sector but across finance, education and science. This led to a volatile security situation, failing essential services and a power vacuum that provided AQI an opportunity to expand its influence.

The consequences of AQI's approach were twofold: first, al-Qa'ida became increasingly alarmed at the group's targeting of Shi'a and broke ties with al-Zarqawi; second, it provoked

the predominantly Shi'a government to overreact against Sunnis. By leveraging sectarian violence, al-Zarqawi had gained political opportunity and power, and he branded AQI as 'all that stood between Sunnis and the Shi'a death squads, giving people no choice but to support ... [AQI] regardless of what they thought of [its] ideology'.²⁰

The violence between Shi'a and Sunnis continued to escalate and was exacerbated by community perceptions that the Shiite Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki was indifferent to Sunni concerns. This perception supported AQI's narrative and encouraged the group's strategy of attrition.²¹ Al-Qa'ida continued to protest AQI tactics and, in a series of envoys and letters, the disagreements between the groups escalated. Shortly afterwards, on 7 June 2006, al-Zarqawi was killed by an airstrike after being tracked by US forces, having reportedly been 'sold out' by al-Qa'ida leaders.²²

Evolution

Having described ISIL's emergence, key 'evolutionary' stages will now be examined through the prism of the group's learning and adaptation, political objectives and the strategic environment. Specifically, four evolutionary stages will be analysed: first, AQI's amalgamation with other groups and changes in US strategy in Iraq; second, the opportunity provided for organisational growth within Camp Bucca; third, the group's adaptation following the Arab Spring into a 'hybrid force' capable of both insurgency-based and conventional warfighting; and, finally, ISIL's ability to assert and maintain its territorial claims in Iraq and Syria.

The first evolution of ISIL occurred in the months following al-Zarqawi's death, as the group changed into a nascent version of ISIL as we understand it today. In October 2006, the group united with other groups and Sunni tribes to form the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), with Abu Omar al-Baghdadi announced as the organisation's Caliph.²³ In contrast to al-Qa'ida's notion of global Islamic uprising, the newly formed ISI prescribed the creation of a real-world caliphate as an immediate objective, and determined that continuing the violence against the Shi'a was the fastest road to achieve it.²⁴

Concurrent with this significant evolutionary step, a number of external events were occurring that would degrade the group's newfound growth. Two of these events reflected changes in the coalition's strategy, the first being the adoption of a counterinsurgency approach (in contrast to the previous counter-terrorism approach), and the second being the coalition's support to the 'Sunni awakening'.²⁵ Ultimately, these twin occurrences seriously degraded the group to the extent that, in 2006, ISI described itself as being 'in extreme'.²⁶

The US, recognising that the mission to Iraq risked strategic if not operational failure, invested in the 'surge' of 2007, which saw significant numbers of troops committed in a counterinsurgency role, supported by a new doctrine crafted by General David Petraeus.²⁷ Part of this strategy saw Petraeus (and the US President) more actively involved in dealing with Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, which started to curtail his biases and shape him to be more inclusive in his decision-making, which significantly reassured Sunni Muslims.²⁸

Encouraged by the changes in US strategy, the 'Al-Anbar awakening' (later the Sunni awakening), saw Sunnis adopt a local patrolling and militia approach to protecting their communities. Some of these groups, such as the 'Sons of Iraq', saw local sheiks turn against AQI and other insurgencies and offer their support to coalition forces and the Government of Iraq.²⁹

The consequence of these changes in the operating environment was dire for ISI, as the grievances they sought to exploit were now being resolved (relatively) peacefully and through legitimate channels. Essential services were being restored, and security was improving as a consequence of the surge and Sunni awakening. This significantly damaged the group's value proposition in relation to its supporters and competitors. In 2010, General Raymond Odierno, Commander of US Forces in Iraq, remarked in a press conference relating to the death of ISIL's latest leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, that '80 per cent of the ISI's top 42 leaders, including recruiters and financiers, had been killed or captured, with only eight remaining at large'.³⁰

Providentially (for ISIL), the Coalition's success in neutralising the previous leadership now

provided an opportunity for the group's second significant evolution—the introduction of ex-Ba'athists into the group's leadership. ISI's new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had been captured by the Coalition and imprisoned at Camp Bucca, an internment facility of some 20,000 Iraqis. Al-Baghdadi thus found himself perfectly positioned to attract new recruits to ISI and stiffen its membership with ex-Ba'athists, many of whom were veterans of the Iraqi Army.³¹

ISI thus emerged with new leadership, having undergone significant learning and adaptation (through the sharing of lessons learned), which saw the group emerge with 'the ideological fervour of [ISI and] ... the organisational skills of [ex-Ba'athists]'.³² The group, newly empowered, was thus perfectly positioned to take its next evolutionary step, one that would be provided by the failure of the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring was a democratic uprising that began in Tunisia and quickly spread across Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.³³ These uprisings met with mixed results but, in the case of Syria, disenchantment with the ruling Assad regime and wider Shi'a-Sunni disputes led to the start of violent civil war.³⁴ These Syrian events would be critical to ISI's third significant evolutionary step—expansion into Syria using hybrid warfare and asserting territorial claim.³⁵

In 2013, ISI expanded into Syria and became known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as it partnered with the Syrian group *Jabhat al-Nusra*. Initially, ISIL, while not allied to the Syrian Assad Government, adopted what has best been described as a 'non-confrontation footing' with Assad, which provided a relative safe haven for the group to operate in.³⁶ However, this footing changed as the group commenced combat operations using a mix of both insurgency-based and conventional-combat operations in Raqqah province, ultimately establishing a presence in Al-Hasakah province and intimidating a number of other provinces to swear allegiance to ISIL.³⁷

Thus, by 2014, ISIL achieved its fourth evolutionary step; it was able to assert a territorial claim in northern Iraq and Syria, and with a fighting force of some 20,000 fighters, was capable of defending it, while implementing Sharia law

within the areas it now controlled.³⁸ Following these accomplishments, al-Baghdadi publicly declared that the Islamic Caliphate had been established and called on all Muslims to emigrate to the caliphate, with a stated expectation that they would defend it.³⁹

This final evolutionary stage saw ISIL expanding and capturing additional territory, including Mosul, Fallujah and even moving into Kurdish territory. With this expansion, the realised tangible benefits, such as the opportunity to seize abandoned and captured military equipment, raid financial reserves and capture oil and gas fields, allowed ISIL to profit from the use or sale of these commodities.⁴⁰ In addition, as the organisation matured, it restored a wide assortment of essential services normally associated with government, including medical care and security, but also dispute-resolution courts, which allowed ISIL to demand taxes from its new constituents.⁴¹ These measures marked ISIL as distinctly different from many groups that had preceded it: it no longer required donations but was capable of producing its own domestic product, becoming largely self-sufficient and 'the richest terrorist organisation' to date.⁴²

Thus, it is argued that by the end of the 'fourth evolutionary stage', ISIL had met three of the four elements of statehood, within the definition provided by the Montevideo Convention adopted by the League of Nations in 1933: the Caliphate now occupied a defined territory (and had proven capable of defending it); it maintained a permanent population within its borders; and provided government and essential services to its constituents. The only missing element was international recognition and the capacity to enter into relations with other nation-states.

In addition to these four major evolutionary stages, a fifth evolution has been the group's sophisticated use of social media, which has been one of the cornerstones of ISIL's success, providing it greater resilience when compared to other groups. After first describing the pivotal role of social media—critical to ISIL's future prospects—the article will examine other elements considered important for the group's future prospects, including remote and self-radicalisation, maintenance of its territorial claim, and its response to the Western containment strategy.

Future prospects

ISIL's future prospects will continue to be dependent on social media, with the group potentially able to recruit more foreign fighters and inspire more 'remote radicals'. In a report tabled to the Australian Parliament in 2015, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) reported that ISIL generates extensive media coverage with radio bulletins (in five languages), four photographic reports, three high-definition videos every day, and high-quality monthly magazines and movies.⁴³ Further, ASIO reported that ISIL had leveraged this unprecedented media presence (in terms of breadth and volume of content) to attract over 120 Australians to join ISIL as foreign fighters in the Middle East, with a further 160 actively supporting from Australia.

While the use of social media is not its exclusive province, ISIL has proven to be one of the most adroit users, quickly adopting what has been described by Yannick Veilleux-Lepage in 2016 as a paradigmatic shift, in that ISIL uses the medium to encourage self/remote radicalisation which, when aligned with parallel activities, inspires lone-wolf actors in support of ISIL.⁴⁴ In this regard, he contends ISIL no longer directs or controls attacks (as its predecessors did) but rather inspires and enables lone actors to take action.

This self/remote radicalisation methodology offers a glimpse into ISIL's future prospects, as it has reputedly inspired attacks both domestically and internationally. Domestically, in the last two years, three ISIL-inspired attacks have been successful, targeting police in two separate attacks in Victoria and NSW, and civilians in the Lindt Café siege in Sydney.⁴⁵ Additionally, ASIO further thwarted attempts in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, and has reported a rising number of passports being revoked annually. Internationally, attacks in Paris, Belgium and Tunisia reinforce this potential future threat.

Moreover, as suggested in Jason Logue's 2015 article 'Propaganda of the deed' and Andrew Watkin's 2016 'Losing territory and lashing out', it is likely that ISIL activities and attacks will increase in an effort to divert attention from the group's losses in a particular area.⁴⁶ This suggests that, in future, spectacular attacks and violent executions should be interpreted as an indicator of desperation rather than strength.

This article asserts that ISIL's key strength is its media operations, and posits that it is likely to retain significant capability into the near future. The information domain reflects the flaws in the aforementioned disaggregation strategy, in that the absence of a unifying (Western) strategic narrative has created an uncontested space in which ISIL has been allowed to dominate. Degrading ISIL's social media capabilities through effective social cohesion messaging will require an 'integrated, coordinated, and synchronized approach' to counter the spread of ISIL propaganda'.⁴⁷ To effectively counter ISIL's message, authorities will need to work with Muslim communities, not against them, in the manner suggested by NSW's recently-conducted 'Countering Violent Extremism' project in western Sydney.⁴⁸

The second area that will influence ISIL's prospects is its ability to maintain its territory, both in the central Caliphate and through its broader territorial claims of the group's *wilayat* (devolution of power) system of provinces in Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. While ISIL has shown the ability to retain territory militarily, in the long term its conventional forces may be insufficient to defend its declared territory. Moreover, having adopted a nation-building approach within its territory (echoing in some parts the US counterinsurgency doctrine described earlier), ISIL will have a long-term obligation to provide these essential services in order to be seen as providing legitimate government to its population.

ISIL is already struggling to deal with many contentious issues within its territory, such as taxes, kidnapping, slavery, extreme justice and religious persecution of minority groups, which will continue to have implications for the community support for the shadow government, particularly if containment measures continue to reduce ISIL's revenue streams. Potentially, responses that target ISIL's legitimacy—both militarily and through other instruments—could push ISIL 'back to its roots as a rural insurgency operating largely outside the cities'.⁴⁹

Finally, the role played by Western strategy itself is an important consideration in ISIL's prospects. This article will specify three elements as particularly relevant: not over-reacting to ISIL activities, thereby (counter-productively) enhancing ISIL's claims to legitimacy through over-securitisation

of Muslims; enhancing the containment strategy; and finally, selecting the end-state desired.

ISIL has demonstrated a keen ability not only to promote sectarian violence but also to embrace a methodology designed to 'terrorise, mobilize and polarize' people towards it, as the lesser evil.⁵⁰ ISIL's successful social media and operations have thus provided an appealing concept to disenfranchised citizens, who become attracted to ISIL's sense of purpose which leads, in a sense, towards the mass-mobilisations described in Eric Hoffer's *The true believer: thoughts on the nature of mass movements* (1951), where ISIL relies on both 'pull' and 'push' recruiting techniques.

The allure of ISIL recruiting can be mitigated by authorities and mainstream media deliberately avoiding 'inflaming' ISIL activities and offering compelling counter-narratives that reduce the propagation of ISIL's message.⁵¹ Similarly, the 'push' component can be avoided by not over-securitising Muslim communities and conforming to ISIL's objectives.

The current Western strategy of containment, as described earlier, comprises mainly airstrike and 'advise and assist' mentoring teams as the predominant methods to reduce ISIL's territory and render it incapable of administering its territory—essentially allowing it to 'fail under its own weight'.⁵² One consequence of this prolonged strategy has been mass migration from Syria and Turkey into Europe which has potentially provided additional opportunities for ISIL members to infiltrate into Europe but also wider disenfranchisement in the Muslim communities, with an ever-present risk of the securitising of these communities, leading to further distrust of government and security agencies.⁵³

Describing an alternative strategy is beyond the scope of this article. However, given the group's learning and adaptation over the past decade, it is assessed that ISIL's successes will continue to ebb and flow into the future although, overall, it will likely continue to prove relatively resilient to containment measures.

Having described these response options and ISIL's possible reactions and prospects, it is argued that before a widening of the campaign is contemplated, a number of factors must be considered. The most important would certainly

be a frank assessment of the desired political end-state sought, which may simply be, as argued by Thomas Ricks in 2015, an 'Iraq that is mostly free from extremists, is not a puppet of Iran, and an adequate [Western] partner with some marginally acceptable form of democracy'.⁵⁴ Without such clarity, ISIL will continue to prosper in the uncontested spaces (both physical and informational) in which it operates.

Conclusion

ISIL's emergence and evolution over the past ten years is largely a consequence of the broader war on terrorism, failure of the Arab Spring revolution and the alienation of Sunni populations in Iraq. The organisation is relatively unique in the sense that it has asserted and maintained territorial claim, which has been reinforced by a skilful and extensive media operation. These key actions have allowed the group to achieve disproportionate influence—to the degree that disenfranchised members of society have joined ISIS as foreign fighters or through so-called 'self-radicalisation' to carry out attacks in local communities.

This article has focused on three key elements of ISIL: its emergence as a terrorist group; its evolution and its assessed prospects into the future. The article has described ISIL's fortunes as ebbing and flowing but assesses that, in general, the group has proven to be resilient, capable of learning and adapting quickly, and is likely to maintain a competitive advantage over other groups for a considerable period. Notwithstanding the difficulty of predicting these challenges, the article has considered specific and broad implications for Australian security policy in framing response options for the Australian government to reconcile the challenges.

Historically, Australia's unique geography and its economic and security arrangements have protected it from a variety of security threats, terrorism included. However, the increasingly connected and globalised nature of society presents new threat vectors which nation-states, transnational criminal organisations and terrorist groups can exploit. This analysis of ISIL finds that while ISIL is not assessed as an existential threat to Australian strategic interests, the group will continue to present significant tactical and operational challenges to Australia.

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