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ISIS: A New Wave in Jihadism

We are happy to publish Volume 6, Issue 8 (September 2014) of the Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis (CTTA) at www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ctta. The three articles in this issue focus on the notorious Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist movement, which was recently renamed the Islamic State (IS) – reflecting its global jihadist agenda similar to Al Qaeda. ISIS has managed to create an ominous, almost theatrically villainous, image for itself. It is important to understand however that Al Qaeda affiliates remain equally wicked, while the two divided jihadist movements have caused an increase in terrorist activity across the Middle East and Africa, as each expands its respective influence in the regions. Meanwhile, the movement of funding, fighters and materials for ISIS remain by and large a mystery.

Guillaume N. Beaurpere offers a systematic overview of the nature of the ISIS threat and means to counter it. He shows that ISIS uses Maoist principles of protracted war ("Three Stages of Revolutionary Warfare") as its strategy for advancement in gaining control of territory and people – a strategy that has already been in use by Al Qaeda affiliates in the region as well as other jihadist groups and insurgencies in the world.

Marcin Styszynski identifies differences in ideology as well as operational capacities with regard to financial and military strength and propaganda dissemination between Al Qaeda Central and its affiliates and ISIS, and that the competition between the two groups has led to an increased terrorist threat and presents new challenges to regional and global security.

Mustazah Bahari and Muhammad Haniff Hassan explain ISIS' black flag, which is also used by several other jihadist groups such as the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda's Al Nusra Front, the Chechen jihadist fighters and non-violent Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, as well as with historical Islamic revolutions and rebellions. However, the black flag is never mentioned in the Quran. Although it appears in the Hadith (reports of the teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet), it could be based on weak symbolism or is religiously meaningless.

ISIS and Protracted War: Why Violent Extremists Persist in the Face of Defeat

Guillaume N. Beaurpere

ISIS is fighting an insurgency deeply influenced by the principles of Maoist protracted political warfare and moreover informed by the successes and failures of previous Al Qaeda movements in Iraq from 2006-2008, and of other jihadist groups attempting to seize and hold territory in countries like Somalia, Yemen and Mali. This analysis argues that, whether it survives or not, ISIS has set a political separatist precedent, the effects of which are yet to be fully understood and addressed by the international community.

The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), now known as the Islamic State (IS), exploded onto the international security agenda with its seizure of territory in eastern Syria and large parts of northern and western Iraq. In short order ISIS achieved tactical success on the battlefield, threatened the survival of a unified Iraqi state, destabilised the wider region, exploited Sunni-Shia sectarian divides, proclaimed a so-called 'caliphate', and most importantly demonstrated an innate ability to organise and govern. Thanks partly to an international media-frenzy, and partly to an elaborate propaganda machine exploiting social media networks, ISIS has been able to attract a following from disenfranchised groups around the world.

Evidence suggests that ISIS is waging a violent insurgency founded on Mao Zedong's principles of protracted political warfare, although the circumstances or motives of the Chinese revolution cannot be compared to the narrow interests of a terrorist movement such as ISIS. Most evident in ISIS' strategy appear to be Mao's "Three Stages of Revolutionary Warfare" or principles of protracted war – the 'Strategic Defence' where space is traded for time, the 'Strategic Stalemate' where the revolution gains in political and military strength relative to its opponent, and the 'Strategic Offence' when the revolutionary movement transitions from guerrilla warfare to a conventional offence to seize power. Mao also expounded on several other principles such

as the need to secure a base area, mass mobilisation and indoctrination and a clear political ideology to lead the movement and guide the military struggle, all of which are evident in ISIS' strategy, albeit in varying degrees. ISIS' protracted war is further informed by the lessons learned by radical Islamists around the world, which perhaps makes ISIS more dangerous and more resilient than its predecessors. Brutal terrorism is certainly one of ISIS' main weapons. Without a strong base and a relatively weak military capability, terror is used to subjugate the population and beat its enemy into exhaustion, although the group's political aspirations are equally significant.

Survivability through Protracted War

The notion of an Islamic State, or a caliphate, is not a new phenomenon in jihadist movements and has always been a central idea to most violent Salafist movements. Elements of Al Qaeda declared an Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in October of 2006. Over the next two years the movement in Iraq was tactically defeated through the mobilisation of the Sunni tribal base combined with a surge of coalition troops under US leadership, but its core ideology persevered. In the chaos of the Syrian civil war, remnants of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and ISI found sanctuary that served as a base area to slowly revitalise and reinvent itself after its initial failures at governance. The movement slowly regenerated and forged renewed alliances with Sunni tribes while observing from afar the successes and failures of jihadist groups attempting to seize and hold territory in Somalia, Yemen and Mali. Those lessons and alliances would prove critical in how ISIS would operate in the future. The failure of the Maliki regime to effectively extend governance to the marginalised Sunni tribes of western and northern Iraq, who had been so critical in countering ISI just a few years prior, then created an environment ripe for ISIS to advance its separatist political cause appealing directly to a segment of disenfranchised Sunni and religious leaders.

Its hybrid protracted war methodology gives ISIS significant flexibility on the battlefield. Shifting to and from the offence and defence is inherently part of their military campaign. ISIS is continuously assessing where and when the enemy is weak, which informs the time and place of when to strike. When their offensive on Baghdad and penetration south of Diyala Province began to stall, ISIS predictably transitioned to urban guerrilla operations in the

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capital and shifted their main military effort to Irbil in the north detecting vulnerabilities in the Kurdish Peshmerga.

Although it has demonstrated an ability to succeed at conventional military operations and to hold territory, ISIS retains an ability to revert back to decentralised guerrilla operations in the face of overwhelming military opposition. This should be an immediate concern to those undertaking a ground military campaign against ISIS, and there is every reason to believe its fighters are trained for this eventuality. ISIS has mobilised mostly on the periphery and in the vast desert spaces of Iraq and Syria. Out of tactical necessity its fighters have moved in and out of denied space, especially the completely uncontrolled border between Iraq and Syria. If defeated on the battlefield, ISIS fighters will likely use this terrain to retreat and depart the region, while many other Iraqi and Syrian fighters will slowly blend into the local population and wage insurgency from within.

Mass Mobilisation

ISIS propaganda has proven to be quite effective at communicating both its ideological concept of an 'Islamic State' and at recruiting foreigners. In fact, ISIS follows a discernable and systematic mobilisation and indoctrination methodology. Multiple reports indicate that fighters are enticed by alluring social media narratives, travel to the region usually entering Syria or Iraq through Turkey, move to safe houses along the border and then on to training camps and indoctrination centres before joining the fight. A vast majority appears to be coming from Europe and the wider Middle East, but there are increasing reports of substantial numbers emanating from the Americas and throughout Asia. This has led to a very real concern amongst affected governments

that ISIS will foment the next generation of international terrorists who will take their violent jihadist experiences back to their countries of origin.

Although support may also come through illicit financial assistance or weapons smuggling, in many cases the propaganda is fomenting a quiet undercurrent to adopt the ISIS political methodology. Here the threat diverges from territorial boundaries of Iraq and Syria and enters a global human domain. Security experts now worry about the countless copycat movements that may adopt their own version of protracted political war, making note that at least one radical Salafist movement, under the right conditions, demonstrated to the world that it could succeed militarily and govern territory. The full impact of this message has yet to fully manifest itself.

A Capacity for Organisation

ISIS is a learning organisation that is implementing a structure of governance that addresses past failures of AQI and ISI. At the helm is the caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, who assumes the name of 'Ibrahim' – the Arabic name for Abraham, chosen no doubt for its religious significance as the 'father of many nations'. He is reportedly surrounded by an inner circle of about ten to twelve close associates. According to a recent Wall Street Journal report, many of these individuals appear to be Iraqis with some having military experience, to include service in Saddam Hussein's army. There are foreigners in key positions, to include a report of a Chechen lieutenant who may have served in the Georgian military. Most opponents to the ISIS ideology were purged over the years with this very tight-knit circle remaining as a trusted cadre of revolutionaries.

Although this small centralised structure constrains the ability of ISIS to generate future leaders in the short term, it appears efforts are underway to expand the core of the movement through indoctrination and a system of tribal patronage. Al-Baghdadi governs through several political councils. Hailing from Samarra in Iraq, he likely has a firm grasp of local governance and the complexity of Sunni tribal alliances. This is an important distinction from his ideological predecessor, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, who did not manage the tribes effectively and was regarded as an outsider by local leaders. Al-Baghdadi appears to have partially co-opted

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some of the tribes by establishing his own council of governors and allowing for some autonomy in local governance pandering to traditional tribal traditions. There are reports of a Shura Council (Islamic advisory council) being established, which could theoretically form the basis for a political assembly. According to members of the US House Armed Services Committee, ISIS has also established various ministries to manage local infrastructure and finance, to include an oil ministry to manage captured infrastructure.

Subordinate to the political organisation, is a military structure that synchronises the activities of its fighters estimated to range between 15,000 and 20,000 – the US Central Intelligence Agency recently placed its estimates as high as 31,000 fighters. The military campaign is directed through a war cabinet. Fighters are likely grouped into two theatres of operation – one in Iraq and another in Syria. According to one Indonesian terrorism expert familiar with cases of foreign fighters travelling to Iraq and Syria, ISIS fighters receive a monthly salary. Its military capacity has increased exponentially over the past several months thanks to captured war materiel. Some of the larger fighting forces now demonstrate a conventional tactical capability to fire and manoeuvre on their enemy while a recent report by INSITE describes other elements that are trained to conduct specialised guerrilla attacks to break enemy strong points or terrorise civilians. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human rights, this military structure is supported by training camps believed to be in Allepo and Raqqa, although it is highly likely some smaller camps exist inside of Iraq by now.

Strategic Implications

ISIS is conducting a protracted war for power and control of territory and people. Its leadership, through years of fighting, has developed a resilient and flexible insurgent movement capable of quickly capitalising on weaknesses in regional state structures, and most significantly this model is exportable. What is required is an equally-protracted strategic vision and determined commitment to undermine and co-opt this violent political movement. This will require significant commitment and long-term perseverance along the following strategic lines.

The top priority is a military counterinsurgency campaign to neutralise, if not destroy, ISIS's fighting capability. The term counterinsurgency is used deliberately to emphasise the political as well as the military aims required of this campaign. Destroying a military capability is not the same as destroying a movement or ideology. It is painfully evident that the community of nations remains unable to defeat the perverted ideologies that drive these violent extremist groups. But over a prolonged period – years, not months – a properly trained, resourced and determined military coalition can substantially degrade the fighting arm of ISIS as it exists today. Even then, security forces can expect to face a prolonged low-level insurgency that will require much more than just air strikes and manpower to manage.

The current strategy is moving in that direction, although overly enabling a weak Iraqi political entity with military power has inherent risks. In the near-term, a United Nations Security Council approved military coalition should lead the counterinsurgency campaign. Only when pre-established political and military conditions are reached should operations be transitioned to Iraqi security forces. The model proposed here is similar in structure and concept to that of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) which did most of the heavy fighting against Al Shabaab militants while the Somali military was organised and trained under the watchful eye of international donors.

Given the ability of ISIS to operate across borders in parts of Iraq and Syria, the military coalition tasked with degrading ISIS must have the authority to operate in eastern Syria to wage a successful counterinsurgency campaign. Ideally this is sanctioned by the UN or at a minimum by the Arab League, although coalition operations in Syria will likely draw hostility from

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many more groups than just ISIS. The question of arming or enabling the Syrian opposition will be central to the effort. It is unlikely the Free Syrian Army (FSA), by far the least radical of the opposition groups, will undertake offensive operations against ISIS without some assurance that a condition to international support is the overthrow of the Assad Regime. The Russian and Chinese governments will never sanction such a move, so military action in Syria will be hugely contentious. Short of taking on a full-fledged, coalition-led military reform and training of the FSA, it seems the best short-term option is a robust external military intervention to displace ISIS from key areas and hold terrain as safe areas until the civil war is resolved.

The military campaign will buy time and space to undermine and dismantle ISIS' organisational and governing capability. Political accommodation with the hardcore leaders of ISIS is not feasible. A select few individuals will have to be captured or killed to eliminate its ideological cult, but those Sunni tribal groups and religious leaders that identified with the separatist concept of an 'Islamic state' must be politically enticed away from the movement. The Iraqi state unfortunately has a dismal track record of achieving national unity, and the formation of a new government is no guarantee it will not once again fracture along sectarian lines. The initiative to integrate the Sunni tribes into the government and the military is a positive development, but unless Sunni Islamic parties are also allowed to form and given a legal platform for their conservative agenda, there will always be a Sunni proclivity to revert to violence. Although accepting Islamist parties may not be appealing to Western observers, it is critical to political accommodation and to undermine ISIS' main appeal.

Another line of effort must be on disrupting ISIS' sources of economic and financial support. The military campaign should focus on quickly recapturing key infrastructure that allows ISIS to maintain economic viability. Since much of the financial support appears to be coming through international private donors and illicit criminal activity, the full weight of the coalition's investigative and law enforcement capability must be brought to bear on the problem to cut off these sources permanently. If ISIS can no longer fund its fighters and provide basic services in areas under its control, it can no longer govern and therefore quickly loses legitimacy.

Next, there must be a comprehensive effort at reintegration and rehabilitation of not only Iraqi and Syrian fighters, but the growing number of foreign fighters. With thousands of fighters under ISIS control, and additional thousands of civilians and aspiring jihadists indoctrinated within occupied space, simply criminalising and prosecuting this mass base is virtually impossible.

Finally, the fractured relationships of the various Salafist groups, both in Iraq and Syria and around the globe, should be exploited to undermine recruiting and popular appeal. Where ISIS diverges from Maoist methods is in its rejection of a unified front. There is open disagreement and violence between AQ affiliates and ISIS for example. These rifts should be reinforced through every possible means, especially informational. It is better that the jihadists destroy themselves while the Iraqi military is reconstituted and the coalition begins its own long struggle against ISIS.

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ISIS and Al Qaeda: Expanding the Jihadist Discourse

Marcin Styszynski

Differences in ideology as well as operational capacities with regard to financial and military strength and propaganda dissemination between Al Qaeda Central and its affiliates and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has led to a competition that has increased the terrorist threat and presented new challenges to regional and global security.

Legacy of the Arab Spring

Social protests and clashes during the Arab Spring that swept across the Middle East in 2011 led to the collapse of the authoritarian regimes in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, stimulating hopes of democratic and economic reforms and overall social stability. However, the subsequent victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Salafist groups in the democratic elections in Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, as well as the growing role of Islamist insurgents in Syria, strengthened the position of political Islam in the region.

At the same time, the Arab Spring movement brought the prospects of a return of the 'leader', called *zai'im* in Arabic, as well as implementation of secular or military governments and banning of Islamist organisations. This provoked concerns among revolutionaries, including Islamist movements which intensified violent activities of radical and extremist groups like Ansar Bait Al Maqdis ('Followers of Jerusalem') active in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt and the Tunisian and Libyan branches of Ansar Al Sharia ('Followers of Sharia').

The painful impact of the Arab revolution are most evident in Syria where peaceful demonstrations, political negotiations and peace talks were replaced by an escalation of violence and expansion of new forms of jihadism spearheaded by the Al Qaeda affiliated Al Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, also going by the name the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) before its recent renaming to the Islamic State (IS). Syria has also transformed into a favourable training and recruitment ground for foreign volunteers, like Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion in the 1980s. There are hundreds of militants from all over the world especially from Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa fighting in Syria with ISIS and other jihadist groups. Jaish al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar ('The Army of Immigrants and Mohammad's Supporters') for example, gathers Caucasian fighters under the commandment of Omar Gorgashvili, Abu Omar Shishani and Magomed Abdurakhmarov.

Thus, it appears that three years after the Arab Spring, Arab societies have had to contend with the fact that the core mandates of the revolution such as democracy, freedom and liberalism remain as utopian as ever. Moreover, now they have also to endure chaos and destabilisation along with increasing radicalisation among the population and alarming levels of terrorist violence.

Jihad in Syria

It should be pointed out that Islamists in Syria refer to the same ideological and theological backgrounds elaborated in the works of Hassan Al-Banna (1906-1946; founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 1928) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966; leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s) which call for the creation of an 'Islamic state' based on Sharia values. However, Islamists in Syria differ in their strategy, methods and the extent to which they are radicalised. For example, Jabha Islamiyya ('Islamic Front'), Jaish al-Mujahidin ('The Army of Mujahideen') and Jabhat Suwwar Surya ('Syrian Revolutionaries' Front') call for an Islamic state, but they are more pragmatic and cooperate with the secular opposition, including the Free Syrian Army.

Fighting among other rival factions, ambitions of the particular leaders as well as ideological discussions have brought two groups into the forefront in Syria: (1) Jabhat an-Nusra li-Ahl ash-

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Sham ('Support Front for the People of Sham') known as Al Nusra Front led by Abu Mohammad Al-Jawlani who has pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda Central and its chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri and (2) Ad-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa ash-Sham known as Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) headed by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

Both organisations aim to establish a caliphate and administer it based on the literal interpretation of Sharia law and traditions as practiced in the first Muslim societies and empires. Both strive to achieve this through violent means. Like ISIS, Al-Jawlani's Al Nusra fighters also kill or unleash violence against foreigners who serve and work in Syria like journalists, NGO workers and doctors. In August 2012, Al Nusra Front captured the journalist Peter Theo Curtis, who was finally released by the end of August 2014. Al Nusra is also responsible for the kidnapping of 43 United Nations peacekeepers during fights in Quneitra. However, contrary to ISIS, Al Nusra does not release video footage of their brutal executions on the internet, such as with the three beheadings of David Cawthorne Haines, Steven Sotloff and James Foley this year. Al Nusra Front often prefers enormous ransoms or liberation of comrades from prisons. Such demands were presented after the kidnapping of the 43 UN peacekeepers.

However, the loyalty to Al-Zawahiri-led Al Qaeda Central has become a crucial ideological dispute between the two rival factions. The sermon delivered by Al-Baghdadi in the main mosque in

Mosul in June 2014 underlined the position of ISIS in this respect. His speech used theological and metaphoric phrases as well as emotive words in calling for the establishment of the caliphate and a new Islamic State, exemplifying the ideological competition him and the leader of Al Qaeda Central in their respective efforts to expand influence and power in the region.

Ideology and Propaganda

In his manifesto "*Khuruj min da'irat al-abthi wa al -fashli*" ("Exit from the Circle of Inefficiency and Failure") released in February 2014, which contains an innovative vision of battles and identification of new frontlines in the changing Arab and Muslim world, AQC leader Al-Zawahiri brought out the rivalry with ISIS in stark terms. Al -Zawahiri has condemned ISIS for its brutal tactics (although the Al Qaeda affiliated Al Nusra Front is an equally violent group in Syria) and its tendency for autonomy leading to disobedience. Al-Zawahiri stressed that Al Nusra Front is the only representative of jihad in Syria. He has also stated that ISIS should return to its local structures in Iraq and adopt its previous name of Ad-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq ('Islamic State of Iraq'). Syria plays an essential role for Al-Zawahiri, who encourages all jihadists to ignore their disputes, unite and fight for establishing the caliphate in Syria.

Many insurgents ignored Al-Zawahiri's recommendations and expressed their fascination of Al-Baghdadi's successful offensive in the region. In April 2014 the spokesman of ISIS, Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani, issued the manifesto "*Ma kana hada manhajuna wa lan yakuna*" ("It was Not Our Way and It Won't Be"), which criticised Al Qaeda Central formalising ISIS' separation from Al Qaeda and the rest of the fighters. Al-Adnani also stated that Al-Zawahiri betrayed the insurgents who fight everyday in the battlefields of Iraq and Syria. The message also glorified Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and condemned Al-Zawahiri for straying away from the path of jihad and for cooperating with infidels and secularists. ISIS has encouraged its supporters to continue the fight and return to the roots of jihad as advocated by Osama bin Laden and as demonstrated by the spectacular jihadist operations of the past.

Al Nusra also attempts to distinguish itself by emphasising specific objectives for the jihadist movement. For example, Al Nusra not only defends the Palestinian cause, it seized the

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border crossing in the Quneitra province connecting Syria with Golan Heights and announced potential attacks against the 'Hebrew State' in order to liberate Gaza and Jerusalem. In contrast, the ISIS leader Al-Baghdadi makes only the general statement that ISIS fighters should overthrow corrupt regimes in Arab countries and then destroy Israel.

Al-Baghdadi's followers have started a massive media campaign. They publish an English language magazine called *Dabiq.* The name refers to the historic Battle of Marj Dabiq near Aleppo in Syria (1516-17), when the Ottoman army had conquered most of the Middle East which encompassed the entire region of Syria to build the new empire. The symbolic battle corresponds with ISIS' ideology of regaining the Islamic caliphate in historic regions of Muslim rule (which of course does not take into account the history of the region prior to Muslim domination). The *Dabiq* magazine is similar to *Inspire* which is linked to Anwar Al-Awlaqi, the US-born radical cleric. *Inspire* became an important communication and motivational platform for Islamist extremists around the world. Instead of long theological and political discussions, the magazine contained short messages based on suggestive graphics and provocative pictures, its style similar to the

tabloid press or comics. The messages usually called for martyrdom and bravery of militants or referred to the destructive activities of Western countries.

Dabiq reflects the visually effective style and professional production of *Inspire* and contains stirring photos of ISIS' successful offensives and campaigns in Syria and Iraq. This has included images of wounded Iraqi soldiers among fires and explosions from the 'Soldiers' Harvest' campaign targeting Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) aimed at establishing territorial control in Iraq and Syria (which began in July 2013), distribution of food and water by ISIS in regions under its control and victorious parades of militants in invaded cities. The magazine has also featured images of ISIS' persecution of different Muslim factions, especially the Shi'a and Sufi communities. For example, some colourful pictures and sophisticated graphics show destroyed shrines and executions of Shi'a prisoners and individuals from the Christian and Yazidi communities. The pictures are accompanied by captions such as "*Khalifah declared''*, "*a new era has arrived*" and "*it's either the Islamic State or the flood*". In this way, ISIS avoids theological argumentations and rather uses short messages including recitation of particular Quranic verses and strong ideological statements in its 'marketing' campaign. Notably, *Dabiq* targets a young, Western audience to attract foreign volunteers and encourages them to join the Islamic State in the Middle East or to carry out terrorist attacks in their own countries.

ISIS' massive propaganda campaign has overshadowed Al Nusra's small scale propaganda activities mostly limited to jihadist websites, which also serve as the primary means of indoctrination: *Shabakat al-Jihad al-Alam* (*Worldwide Jihad Network*: www.shabakataljahad.com) and *Shabakat Ansar al-Mujahidin* (*Mujahideen Followers Network:* www.as-ansar.com). However, the websites are often blocked or suspended by governments and they do not reach an audience as wide as through ISIS' social media campaign.

Financial Strength

Funding is a key factor for jihadists, as indeed their strength and sustainability is determined by their financial strength. While ISIS is suspected of receiving funds internationally, it has also stolen US $429 million from the Iraqi Central Bank, seized the Baiji oil refinery in the north of Baghdad and has taken control of the Shaar gas field near Palmyra, one of Syria's largest hydrocarbons reservoirs. This has made ISIS one of the most cash-rich militant groups in history. The financial capability of the Al Nusra Front is not as strong, while the group also relies on support from foreign donors.

Regional and Global Influence

Apart from influencing Western audiences, Syrian and Iraqi jihadists have a direct influence on particular groups in the Middle East and Africa. ISIS especially has inspired fighters in other countries in the region encouraging them to

Figure 1 – Cover (left) and a page (right) of the first issue of *Dabiq* published in June 2014.

establish caliphates in their own countries. This is evident in the case of jihadist movements in the Maghreb and Sahel where local leaders express support or disobedience to the leadership of Al-Zawahiri and Al-Baghdadi respectively.

Although the main group in the region, Tanzim al-Qa'ida fi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami ('Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb'/AQIM) and its leader Abdelmalek Droukdel still owe allegiance to Al-Zawahiri, scattered groups like Ansar Al Sharia ('Sharia Followers') or Uqba Ibn Nafi (named after the Arab general from the Umayyad dynasty who began the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb) have issued positive statements about Al-Baghdadi's caliphate. Ansar Al Sharia's spokesman delivered a passionate speech in July 2014 in the Kairouan mosque in Tunisia glorifying Al-Baghdadi's successful offensives. He also called to liberate jailed members of the organisation in Tunisia. ISIS also revived Iyad Agh Ghali, the leader of Ansar Ad-Din ('Followers of the Faith') that seized northern Mali in 2012. He has stated that affiliation with ISIS would create new opportunities for jihadist groups in the region and that it would strengthen operational capacities of fighters.

ISIS' strategy of regional expansion/ alliances has resulted in the intensification of terrorist assaults. For example, in May 2014, AQIM delivered a statement declaring its involvement in the terrorist attack against Tunisian Interior Minister Lotfi Ben Jeddou that killed four security guards. This was the first assault by AQIM in Tunisia, which demonstrates a new cooperation with Tunisian groups. In July 2014, fourteen Tunisian soldiers were killed and twenty wounded in the two terrorist attacks in the area of Jebel Chaambi. The Tunisian Ministry of Defence stated that it was the bloodiest attack against the army since independence in 1956. Algerian and Tunisian authorities have deployed 20,000 soldiers to secure the borders of the region against contraband and penetration of terrorists. Touareg militants claimed responsibility for the suicide attack in northern Mali in July 2014 that killed one French soldier. In July 2014, different tribal militias and some Islamist groups began an intense assault aimed at capturing the international airport in Tripoli, Libya. There have been many casualties near the airport and in neighboring civilian districts since July.

Moreover, Abubakar Shekau, leader of Boko Haram in West Africa, has also voiced his loyalty

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to Al-Baghdadi and has made positive statements about the new caliphate. He has encouraged his militants to continue attacks in Nigeria and neighboring countries. In July 2014, Boko Haram militants attacked the residence of Cameroon's Deputy Prime Minister and kidnapped his wife, also killing three people in the ambush. A Cameroonian mayor was kidnapped in a separate attack on his home. These were Boko Haram's first elaborate terrorist plots against authorities of the neighboring country.

Some groups in other parts of the Arab world still support Al-Zawahiri's position including Al-Qa'ida fi Jazirat al-Arab ('Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula'/AQAP) and Al Shabaab in Somalia. Both of these organisations regard Al-Zawahiri as the Emir of the Umma ('Muslim nation'). They stress that they will continue their fight under Al-Zawahiri's commandments and leadership. This also reinforces their allegiance to the Al Nusra Front and possible cooperation between Al Qaeda's Somali and Yemeni factions.

The conflict between Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, as well as the divided loyalties between those jihadist groups who support Al Qaeda Central and those who support ISIS, demonstrate a crisis in jihadism and a definite rift between the old generation of leaders and young militants as well as a contestation between pragmatism and adventurism respectively. This could be a challenge or an opportunity in responding to the jihadist threat. An opportunity because, as admitted by several jihadist strategists, unnecessary adventurism manifested in brutality and indiscriminate killings, have undermined the ideological appeal of the jihadist movement significantly in terms of support from the Muslims, for whom groups like ISIS claim to be working. The increasingly audacious attacks

by and growing power of the groups are also strengthening the resolve of the respective governments and the international community to respond with more resolve.

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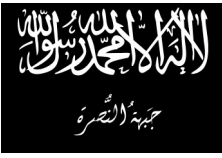
The Black Flag Myth: An Analysis from Hadith Studies

Mustazah Bahari and Muhammad Haniff Hassan

ISIS' black flag, which is also used by several other jihadist groups such as the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda's Al Nusra Front, the Chechen jihadist fighters and non-violent Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, is never mentioned in the Quran. Although the black flag appears in the Hadith (reports of the teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet), it is based on weak symbolism or the narrations are unsubstantiated.

Lately, images of black flags have become a prominent feature in the media. It is proudly displayed by militants of the Islamic State (IS), formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)/Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), during their victory parades and are flown across vast Sunni territories in Iraq that have fallen into their hands.

In fact, the black flag is not exclusively used by the IS. It is used for its symbolic value by a number of radical and militant groups such the Taliban in Afghanistan, Jabhah Al Nusrah/ Al Nusra Front (a branch of Al Qaeda) in Syria, Al Qaeda central in Afghanistan/ Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Chechen jihadist fighters and the Hizb ut-Tahrir ('Party of Liberation', an unarmed international Islamic political movement headquartered in Lebanon), as depicted in the following table.

Group	Black Flag
Taliban – armed movement that was founded in 1996 by Mullah Omar and ruled Afghanistan until the US invasion in 2001.	*Translated text from flag:* *'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Messenger'*
Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) – movement originally founded in Iraq by Abu Mus`ab Al-Zarqawi in 2004 to wage an armed resistance against the coalition forces led by the United States.	*Translated text from flag:* *'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Messenger'*
Jabhah Al Nusrah (Al Nusra Front) – Al Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria, fighting against the Assad Government; Jabhah Al Nusrah declared its formation in January 2012.	*Translated text from flag:* *'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Messenger'; 'Jabhah Al Nusrah'*
Al Qaeda – global jihadist group founded by Osama bin Laden in 1996.	*Translated text from flag:* *'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Messenger'*
Hizb ut-Tahrir – non-violent global Islamist movement founded by Shaykh Taqiuddin Al-Nabhani in Jerusalem in 1953.	*Translated text from flag:* *'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Messenger'; 'Party of Liberation'*
Chechen jihadist fighters who began fighting in the North Caucasus in 1999.	*Translated text from flag:* *'Jihad in the way of Allah'; 'Allah is the Greatest'*

By and large, the general public is not aware of the symbolic meaning behind the said flag. More perceptive individuals would speculate that the flag's black colour may not be a coincidence, and that it may hold some significance that they are left only to ponder upon. Thus, this article is written to provide a brief explanation of the symbolic meaning behind the black flag used by Islamist groups, as well as to discuss the validity of this meaning from the Islamic theological viewpoint.

Use of the Black Flag in Historical Islamic Movements

The use of the black flag by Muslim revolutionary movements is not new. Prophet Muhammad used the black flag as his military flag. However, the Prophet's black flag was never a 'symbol' of his movement; it was used merely for the purpose of identification, to differentiate between his army and the enemy's. It has also been reported that the Prophet used other colours in his military flag.

The black flag was prominently used by the Abbasid ('Islamic') revolutionary movement which was based in Khurasan (what is today the region covered by Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran and parts of Pakistan). This movement rebelled against the Umayyad caliphate, reportedly as the Abbasid felt that they had the utmost right to lead the caliphate state due to their direct family connection with the Prophet, while the Umayyad were from the Quraish tribe. The Abbasid movement was successful in bringing down the Umayyad caliphate to found the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad in 750 C.E. The black flag then became the official flag for the Abbasid.

Thus, many historians argue that the Abbasid revolution is the major contributor to the contemporary popularity of the narrative of and mystical meanings surrounding the black flag. It should be noted that even during the time of the Abbasid revolution, fabricated stories and narratives were disseminated until they became part of accepted popular tradition and legend in the name of Islam for the purpose of winning over the people's support for the revolution.

The Black Flag in Islamic Theology

The black flag is nowhere mentioned in the Quran. There is not even a single intimation in the Quran that promotes the use of the black flag or regards it as holy or sacred. What then makes

> **" There is not even a single intimation in the Quran that promotes the use of the black flag or regards it as holy or sacred. "**

the black flag a positive symbol to be capitalised by contemporary radical movements?

The answer is in a few Hadith (reports of the teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet), recorded in Books of Hadith ('Prophet's Tradition'), Islam's second most authoritative source. The Hadith prophesise the emergence of an army from an area known as Khurasan (the region constituting Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran and parts of Pakistan today) flying the black flag before the end of this world. From this army, the Muslim Mahdi ('Messiah') will arise and lead it to achieve decisive victory against enemies of Islam, to finally restore the glory of Islam. The Hadith also call on Muslims to support and join the army of the black flag when it appears.

Thus, the Hadith provide a group carrying the black flag with the metaphorical meanings of:
• a truth-bearing group
• a legitimate struggle
• a victorious group
• a group which Muslims are obliged to support and join

However, the Hadith do not provide details of the actual design of the black banner, and consequently jihadist groups carry different versions of the black flag. Different Islamic (Arabic) expressions such as '*La ilahailla Allah Muhammad Rasul Allah*' ('There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Messenger'), '*Allahu Akbar*' ('Allah is the Greatest'), *Al-Jihad Sabiluna* ('Jihad is our way') and others have been included by contemporary groups to enhance the flag's allegorical power.

Since the theological basis of the black flag is derived from the Hadith, it would be appropriate

to analyse the authenticity of the relevant Hadith in order to ascertain their validity in Islam. This article will not be able to discuss all of the many Hadith pertaining to the black flag, but will analyse a selected few, key Hadith in relation to the meaning given to the black flag in line with the approach used in Hadith Studies. The analysis will conclude with the general theological position held by Muslim scholars on Hadith relating to the black flag.

Hadith #1 (Note: This Hadith is not found in the Books of Hadith, but has been referred to by Islamic scholars historically)

Abdullah bin Mas`ud narrated that the Prophet said: "A Nation will come from the east with a black flag and they will ask for some charity ['khair'] (because of them being needy) but the people will not give it [charity] to them. Then, they will fight and win over those people (who did not give them what they asked). Now the people will give them what they asked for, but they [the army] will not accept it until they [the people] will hand it [charity] over to a person from my progeny who will fill the world with justice just as it was previously filled with oppression and tyranny. So if anyone of you finds this nation (from the east with black flags) then you must join them even if you have to crawl over ice.

This Hadith is narrated by Sunan Ibn Majah and Musnad Al-Bazzar from Yazid ibn Abi Ziyad, from Ibrahim Al-Nakha`i, from Abdullah bin Mas`ud to the Prophet.

However, Al-Bazzar (827- 904C.E), a scholar of the Hadith and author of *Al Musnad* ('A Collection of Authoritative Narrations') has said that Yazid ibn Abi Ziyad (the narrator of the above Hadith) was not known to receive the Hadith from Ibrahim Al-Nakha`i. Waki `ibn al-Jarrah (746-812 C.E.), and a Hadith scholar born in Iraq has said, "This Hadith is not known." Ahmad Bin Hanbal (780-855 C.E.), founder of the Hanbali School of Jurisprudence, held the same view.

Hammad bin Usamah, a narrator of the Hadith, as reported in *Al-Dhu`afa* ('A Collection of Weak Narrators') by Al-`Uqaily, declared that he will never accept Hadith from Yazid ibn Abi Ziyad, even if he swore (upon its truth) fifty times in front of him. Al-Zahabi said in his book *Siyar Al-A`alam* ('Scholars' Biographies') that Yazid is a Hadith narrator with a flaw, and Ibn Hajar in his book *Taqrib Al-Tahzib* ('Simplified Refinement of

> **" Since the theological basis of the black flag is derived from the Hadith, it would be appropriate to analyse the authenticity of the relevant Hadith in order to ascertain their validity in Islam ... "**

Biographies'), regarded him as a weak Hadith narrator (with a Shi'ite inclination).

Hadith #2 (Note: This Hadith is not found in the Books of Hadith, but has been referred to by Islamic scholars historically)

Abdur Rahman Al-Jarshi, narrated from a companion of the Prophet `Amr bin Murrah Al-Jamli that the Prophet said:

Surely black flags will appear from the Khurasan until the people (under the leadership of this flag) will tie their horses with the Olive Trees between Bait-e-Lahya and Harasta. We asked: 'Are there any Olive trees between these places?' He said, 'If there isn't then soon it will grow so that those people (of Khurasan) will come and tie their horses there.'

This Hadith was narrated from Abdul Rahman Al-Jarshi whose real identity is unknown. The text cannot be traced to any sources, which thus makes it unverifiable.

Hadith #3 (Musnad Ahmad, no. 8775; Sunan Al-Tirmizi, no. 2269; Al-Awsat, no. 3560; Al-Dalail, no. 6/516)

Abu Hurairah narrated that the Prophet said:

(Armies carrying) the black flag will come from Khurasan. No power will be able to stop them and they will finally reach Eela (Aqsa Mosque in

in Jerusalem) where they will erect their flags.

This Hadith is narrated by Ahmad bin Hanbal, Al-Tirmizi, Al-Tabarani and Al-Baihaqi from Rusydain bin Sa`ad, Yunus bin Yazid, Ibn Syihab, Qubaishoh bin Zuaib, to Abu Hurairah.

Al-Tirmizi, author of *Sunan Al-Tirmizi ('Collection of Hadith by Al-Tirmizi')*, ruled this narration as weak because the actual chain of narrators is doubtful: some narrated from Yunus - from Ibn Shihab, while others narrated from Rusydain - from Ibn Shihab.

Hadith #4 (Note: This Hadith is not found in the Books of Hadith, but has been referred to by Islamic scholars historically)

The Prophet reportedly said:

When you see the black flag coming from Khurasan, join them even if you have to crawl over the snow ... that is the army that will liberate the Holy Land, and there is no power that can stop them.

Hadith scholars such as Al-Zahabi, Ahmad bin Hanbal and Al-Tabarani have concluded that this Hadith cannot be accepted because the content has been intermixed with other narrations on the black flag of Khurasan.

Hadith #5 (Sunan Ibn Majah, no. 4048 and Al-Mustadrak, no. 4/502)

Ibn Majah and Al-Hakim recorded that the Prophet said:

If you see the black flag coming from Khurasan, go to them immediately, even if you have to crawl over the snow, because indeed amongst them is the Caliph al-Mahdi ...and no one can stop the army until they get to Jerusalem.

This Hadith was also narrated by Imam Ahmad from the path of Sharik bin Abdillah - from Ali bin Zaid bin Jad`an - from Abu Qilabah - from Thauban. According to Al-`Ijli, in his book *Ma'rifatAl-Rijal ('Biographies of Narrators')*, the chain of this Hadith is disconnected because Abu Qilabah never heard a narration from Thauban.

Ibn Al-Jauzy, in his book *Al-'Ilal Al-Mutanahiah ('Microflaws of Narrators')*, stated the same path for this Hadith and concluded that Ali bin Zaid bin Jad`an is a narrator with a flaw.

This Hadith was also narrated by Ibn Majah and Al-Bazzar from Abd Al-Razzaq Al-San`ani - from Al-Thauri - from Khalid Al-Hazza' - from Abu Qilabah - from Abu Asma'Al-Rahbi - from Thauban. Scholars, however, differ on the validity of the Hadith from this path. Al-Bazzar and Al-Hakim considered it as authentic. Ibn `Ulayyah, Al-`Uqaili and Ibn Qudamah ruled it as "weak and similar to the chain of Khalid Al-Hazza", as reported in the books *Al-`Ilal ('The Flaws')* by Imam Ahmad and *Al-Dhu`afa ('The Weak Narrators')* and *Al-Muntakhab Min `Ilal Al-Khallal ('Selections of Flaws from al-Khallal)* written by Ibn Qudamah al-Maqdasi.

Hadith #6 (Note: This Hadith is not found in the Books of Hadith, but has been referred to by Islamic scholars historically)

Muhammad, son of Al-Hanafiah said:

The black flag will come out for the children of Al-Abbas. The other black flag will come from Khurasan. Their turbans will be black and their clothes white. On their front will be a man named Shuayb, the son of Salih, from Tamim. They will defeat the companions of the Sufyani until he comes to the House of Jerusalem where he will establish his power for the Mahdi, and he will be supplied with three hundred (men) from Syria after his arrival and the matter will be settled for the Mahdi in seventy-two months (six years).

Contemporary scholars such as Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Turaifi, Sheikh Adnan Al-`Ar`ur, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Mutlaq and many others rule that this narration cannot be traced to any source. There is a possibility also that the content has been mixed with other narrations associated with the black flag and Al-Mahdi ('Messiah').

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be made based on what has been presented above. First, the black flag has no clear figurative meaning in Islam due to the absence of strong evidence to support it, as the authenticity of the narrations are considered weak or are rejected by scholars of the Hadith. The key basis for their rejection is a 'flaw' in a narrator or due to a narration being fabricated.

Ahmad bin Hanbal (founder of the Hanbali School of Jurisprudence) prohibits all narrations on the black flag because they are not reliable or authentic. Sheikh Al-Sharif Hatim bin Arif Al-`Auni, an expert in the field of Hadith Studies from Umm Al-Qura University has said, "Symbols

such as the black flag has been fabricated by liars for their own personal agenda from the past till today." His view is consistent with that of Al-Zahabi, author of *Al-Siyar* and *Al-Tarikh Al-Kabir*, who said that history has recorded how Abu Muslim al-Khurasani (718 – 749 C.E.), an Abbasid reformist who became the governor of Khurasan, was the one who raised the black flag during the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate and similarly, Yazid bin Mahlab, a rebel at the time of Umar bin Abdul Aziz, raised black flags calling upon the people to give him a pledge of obedience.

Second, in addition to the above reasoning that the said narrations are not acceptable, it can be concluded that no one should believe, support or join any group that makes use of the black flag to legitimise their struggle simply on the basis of the symbol. Muslims should not regard them as the trustworthy group representing Truth simply because they carry the black flag.

A third conclusion to be made is that history itself has provided proof of the invalidity of the black flag claim: Al-Mahdi did not appear and the Day of Resurrection did not come about after the black flag was raised by the Abbasid rebellion or the various groups that came later. Even if, for the sake of argument, the narrations are considered acceptable based on a few 'authentic' Hadith or the narrations mutually strengthen each other, no one can give assurance that a group that raises the black flag represents the group prophesised by the Prophet. It is possible that the Prophet refers to a group which has not emerged yet.

The use of the black flag or banner by jihadist groups such as IS has been an act of manipulation of popular folklore among Muslims to support their political agenda. However, contemporary militant groups have understood very well the weaknesses of the black flag Hadith within Islamic theology, and that the religious meaning of the black flag is just a myth. Thus, they have never used these Hadith as a basis for or a part of their ideology. A search on the *Minbar Al-Tawhid and Al-Jihad* website, which is considered to be the largest repository of jihadist ideological materials, does not produce any results on black flag Hadith or related materials used by militant groups.

It is important for Muslims to understand that Truth is not defined or represented by symbols such as a flag, turban, colour or clothing style. Truth in Islam is based primarily on evidence found in the Quran and Hadith which can be supported by reasoned arguments. It must also be manifested through right behaviour according to the religion. Thus, no symbol or slogan, can justify acts of terror and extremism.

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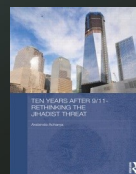
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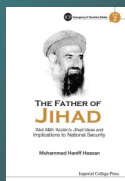
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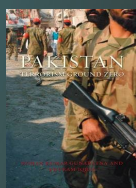Hassan (Imperial
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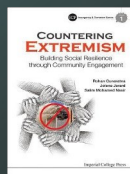
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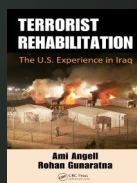College Press, 2013)

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