

Understanding the Nature of ISIS

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Abstract

Islam is a religion of peace and equilibrium; misguided Muslims are not. The predicament therefore lies on the line between these erroneous Muslims and the religion. Regrettably, this line is fashioned by this group of Muslims who interpret the religion based on their whims, interest and based on their limited knowledge. Yet, the saddest aspect of this is that majority of the Muslims worldwide are watching while insignificant group of senseless individuals act absurdly against them and their religion. In my view, all citizens of this beautiful universe share the blame of this mess; in fact, every one of us directly or indirectly is in a way part of this muddle. We have allowed dictators to oppress, invaded others and watched the killings of the innocent. ISIS could be said is the biggest entity of our life time on the line between extremism and moderation. It has gradually appeared and caught the world out of guard; by capturing the attention of the international community through barbarity and formation of its own state; changing the political map of the Middle East since the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Some observers have argued that ISIS appeared suddenly and out of nowhere; but in reality, it did not; in fact, nothing of this nature and magnitude comes out of the naught. On the contrary, ISIS is the product of the circumstances and times in the region and in the Muslim world; the pressure between wasatiyah and takfirism, between secular political outlook or ideologies and religious worldviews as well as between nationalism, nation state and khilafah political system. Add to this the dynamics of the region. Therefore, ISIS is a takfiri movement with political agenda, the chaos and civil war in Syria, the political disarray in Iraq, the American invasion, the attitude of Iran, the absolute monarchies in the Arabian Gulf, as well as the suppression of Arab spring all helped ISIS to become one of the politically most powerful jihadis movement.

1. Introduction

ISIS gradually evolved to become an independent jihadist movement. It has benefited largely from the political conditions of the region; to develop into an inclusive-elitist-takfiri organization. The objective of this paper is to produce a simple document to make you understand the nature of ISIS. It garnered fame for its indiscriminate use of violent and brutal behavior of crucifying, killing, advocating narrow account Islam, and targeting Muslim and non-Muslim civilians. In 2014 ISIS controlled a territory stretching from North of Aleppo to South of Baghdad; including the cities of Raqqa and Mosul; that means six million population of Syrians and Iraqis were living under the rule of ISIS during this period. ISIS draws its legality and political legitimacy from Islam; of which they garble and distort. Its leaders project robust religious appeal and regard other Muslims as irreligious, corrupt and kafirs. They formed strategic alliances with local Sunni tribes and successfully fueled the political and theological fault lines between Shiites and Sunnis in the Muslim world. The political mismanagement of Nouri al-Maliki, the alliance between Hazbulah, Bashar al-Assad and Iran and the ignorance of the Americans on the ground politics have all contributed to the temporary success of the insurgency in consolidating its territorial gains. ISIS has initially generated its revenues from the taxes on businesses, and captured and stolen equipment as well as ransoms, lootings and extortions. Add to this, the sympathizers' donations locally and internationally. After 2014 they have advanced into more sustainable revenue generating mechanisms including oil sales in the black market; by this time, they also have captured some large amounts of military equipment, vehicles, and fuel depots which was adequate to finance its essential activities.

2. Origin and History

The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham(ISIS) or Daesh or “ad-Dawlal-Islamiyyah” is a Sunni extremist group who claims religious and political authority on the territories they rule, mainly in Iraq and Syria. As far as the names are concerned, interestingly the world is increasingly using Daeshin place of other names such as ISIS.

(www.Mirror.co.uk/news) Daesh isan acronym for the Arabic name ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq wa ash-Sham (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). (Al-Arabiyyah)

Basically, Daesh is just another name for ISIS; but it is similar to a disparaging Arabic words such as Daes which means the one who crushes something underfoot, and Dahes which is translated into English as one who sows discord. For this derogative connotation, the group abhor to be referred as Daesh.

Another notable observation on the same issue is the parallel use of both ISIS and ISIL as acronym for the same name and same organization. This has emanated from the indecision or vagueness in how to translate the Arabic word ash-Sham. This is a historical term and it refers or it can be translated as the Levant, Greater Syria, Damascus, or just Syria. The word levant literally means where the sun rises or where the land rises out of the sea. Mainly ascribed to the eastern regions or on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea.(Online Dictionary). Daesh are headline ideologues with extremisms, uncompromising and dogmatic views on political Islam. (Spark, 2014)

It is important to note that ISIS could be traced to Abu Mus‘abaz-Zarqawi who founded Jam‘ah at-Tawhid wa al-jihad in 1999, (Al-Arabiyyah), in Jordan. Zarqawi himself returned from Afghanistan and established Bayat al-Imam,(Welsford, 2014), with the aim to overthrow the monarchy government in Jordan and establish an Islamic government. Worsdell described it as an establishment attempt of Islamic caliphate spanning the Middle East, from Iraq through Syria, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon. (Worsdell, 2014) Zarqawi, to shed light, was infamous for his brutality against Shia religious targets and Sunni civilians, the same attribute attracted him foreign fighters to join his course. (Zelin, 2014)

In October 2004, Zarqawi sympathized and joined bin Laden, pledging him bay‘ah , and renaming his group al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers. Right after, ISIS began its existence as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Therefore, ISIS has originated from al-Qaeda in Iraq and it was the direct outcome of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. On June 29th, 2014, and on the first day of the holy month of Ramadan, ISIS announced the restoration of the Caliphate. As a matter of fact, even the name of the group has evolved. From 1999 to 2004- Jama‘ah at-Tawhid wa al-Jihad, from 2002 to 2006 al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers, also known as during this period al-Qaeda in Iraq, from 2006 to 2013 Islamic State of Iraq and from 2013 to present Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. (Hassan et, al, 2015) Besides, due to its attitude of disregarding the mainstream al-Qaeda’s instruction to stop the offensive on the Shiite cultural sites al-Qaeda ended the relationship with this group. Later, the group institutionalized themselves and established transnational Islamic caliphate and with the Arab Spring they saw a propitious opportunity in Syria to create a greater Islamic state.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took the leadership of the group in 2010, and institutionalized the new name of the group religiously and politically to reflect its broadened ambitions to take over Syria and the Levant region (Sekulow et al., 2014). Al-Baghdadi, avowed the expansion into Syria in 2013, prior to the restoration announcement, this was possible through the merger of al-Nusra group. Nonetheless, as was reported in the media al-Nusra Front denied these revelations. (Newsdesk, Naharnet. “Al-Nusra Commits to al-Qaida, Deny Iraq Branch Merger” 4/10/2013. Naharnet)

3. Who Is Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi

Ibrahim bin Awad bin Ibrahim Al-Badri Al-Radawi Al-Husseini Al-Samarra’i better known popularly Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was born in Samarra, Iraq in 1971, graduated from Saddam University for Islamic Studies in Qur’anic Sciences, enrolled master’s program in the same field and in 2007 defends PhD dissertation in Quranic studies at Saddam University. Baghdadi joined the Muslim Brotherhood, helped found insurgent group to fight U.S. troops in northern and central Iraq, and joined umbrella organization formed by al-Qaida in Iraq for jihadist groups resisting the American occupation. In 2010 he was elected the head of the ISIS, as the previous leader of ISIS, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, died in April 2010. (Zelin, 2014a) Daesh sees him as a knowledgeable person in Islamic culture, shariah and jurisprudence as well as refer to him as a prominent figure of the Jihad movement.

In fact, historians who are interested in Baghdadi’s family history avowed that Baghdadi was indeed a descendant of Prophet Muhammad’s lineage of ancestry line. It was also agreed by the spectrum of the mainstream of authorities on the subject that he was and remains a shrewd strategist, a prolific fundraiser, and a ruthless executioner. Besides, the Washington Post described him as a zealous fighter and a battlefield tactician with extensive military experience in all kinds of urban warfare.

In addition, he is more violent, more virulent, and more anti-humanity than al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri. (Worsdell, 2014) ISIS in support of him wrote that: "Caliph Ibrahim" the mujahid, the scholar who practices what he preaches, the worshipper, the leader, the warrior, the reviver, the descendant from the family of the Prophet, the slave of Allah. (ISIS, 2014)

4. The Goal The Ideology The Success The Funding

The goal of ISIS is to establish an Islamic state in Iraq, Syria, and the entire Levant region under the law of shariah based on the wahabism interpretation of Islam. Specifically, in Iraq and Syria, the group's advancement and success has greatly been determined by internal dynamics of the government or the failure and the absence of statehood. ISIS has learned the mistakes of the previous actions and avoided civil war against the locals. Besides, their political orientation is higher than any movement of this nature in this regard. They calculatively avoided any measure or attitude which may directly or indirectly offends and angers other Iraqi Sunni groups such as the Ba'ath group and tribal militias.

Nevertheless, the success of ISIS is largely due to the divergences, civil war, the proxy war and diverse conflicting groups, and ideologies and sectarian grievances as well as political interests in the region. Another factor which helped ISIS to gain more fame and territory in the region is the historical conflict between the Shiite and Sunni Muslims in Iraq. Since the establishment of the state of Iraq as a nation state in 1920, political problems could be identified with ethnic, tribal, and ideological issues. Nonetheless, the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the end of the Sunni dominated political environment as well as the creation of the new administration lead by the Shiite group has fueled the conflict and widen the political gap between the two. In fact, this division shaped new ideological animosity making the country the proxy of a battleground between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Abdo, 2013).

Add to this, the Nouri al-Maliki leadership, during the new Iraq political process, that has segregated the Sunni groups from the political integration process. As a result, the broader Sunni Arab resistance has joined forces with ISIS army to fight what they see as the Maliki Shiite government sectarian agenda. (Harvey & Pregel, 2014) This is a striking gain, for it has united various Sunni groups who were once enemies, and rivals. Thanks to the immature and mislead political agenda of Maliki. Overnight the Arab Sunnis have formed strong bond and joined ISIS. This alliance included the former Ba'athists, local Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups, and the disaffected Sunni tribal leaders. (Harvey & Pregel, 2014). Not only the Iraqi locals but the Sunni fighters from the rest of the Muslim world also joined. In fact, ISIS attracted foreign fighter more than usual during the Maliki leadership, which made up about 50 percent of its fighting force. (Zelin, 2014)

ISIS has done much better in finance compare to other jihadi movements. Although it previously relied on donations from wealthy individuals in the Gulf Arab states who were supporting ISIS during the Syrian conflict; the Baghdadi leadership has changed all that. ISIS, before they were dealt with by the Iraqi army, had a cash and assets of its own. It was Baghdadi who secured two primary revenue streams: the oil sales and the antiquities from looted historical sites. As stated by Rosiny (2014), according to Athil al-Nujaifi, the governor of Mosul, ISIS used to ran an oil-smuggling network right under the nose of the US occupiers and the Iraqi politicians. It also established strong links within the police and the army and blackmailed people, traders and businessmen from Mosul and other cities and regions under its control. With this income, they financed its advancement into Syria, and attempted to expand their territory to the neighboring regions. (Rosiny, 2014)

The political goal of ISIS was to seek further geographical expansion based on its ideology. In fact, the Levant region consists of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and a small part of Turkey. (Welsford, 2014) It has already set eyes beyond Baghdad and on the Levant region as a whole.

On the question of why ISIS is different from al-Qaeda, the answer is ideological in nature. In the understanding of the common reader the two are identical, at least in various ways including their ideology. In several recordings broadcasted worldwide al-Qaeda claimed that it had ended the relationship with ISIS. What is obvious however is the fact that ISIS is more hardline jihadist movement. Al-Qaeda considers itself to be moderate therefore the rift started to widen. There is also a suspicion, open competition, and mistrust as well as outright hostility between the two. Add to this, the competition for supremacy in the global affairs.

Yet still, the main disagreement between al-Qaeda and ISIS is over authority. ISIS proclaimed itself as the true heir of bin Laden's vision and methodology and views the Ayman az-Zawahiri, bin Laden's successor, as illegitimate even though the prior sentiments noted earlier would suggest otherwise.

Further, ISIS contends that the current al-Qaeda deviated from bin Laden's true approach; thus, rejecting Zawahiri's ruling and questioned his authority. (Zelin, 2014) This is despite of the saying that al-Baghdadi, as the ISIS leader, was once had pledge fealty to al-Qaeda.(Sekulow & Ash, 2014)

Another factor is the methodology. ISIS, as I mentioned, is brutal on both Muslims and non-Muslims; while al-Qaeda is more brutal on the non-Muslims and less violent on the Muslims. Therefore, Al-Qaeda feels that the attack on Muslims would erode public support for them in the Muslim world. (Sekulow & Ash, 2014). As far as the ideology of ISIS is concerned it is obvious that the roots emanate from distorted Wahhabism and religiously lecherous interpretation of Islam. Ibn Taymiyya through Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab advocated firm and absolute interpretation of Islam and rejected innovation since the times of the Prophet. Their approach was strong but it was suitable at that 14th Century era. They contended that any diversion from the literal reading of the Quran and the Hadith is blasphemy and should be eradicated. In this understanding Sufism and moderate Muslims are out of Islam and should be excommunicated and destroyed. Nonetheless both Ibn Taymiyya and ibn Abdul Wahhab are not responsible for what ISIS adheres to as an ideology.

On the question of how dangerous ISIS is compared to other jihadists, the answer is conventionally impetuous. ISIS over-focus on the criminal punishment for individuals, merely based on narrow interpretations of shariah and that is dangerous in all perspectives. Although it is currently attempting to build a softer, more favorable image of itself. None the less despite of all the re-branding efforts, ISIS remains ruthless as it commits violence against fellow Muslims in violation of the Islamic Law. They routinely commit war crimes and engage in torture in violation of international law. Above all, they also issue threats to Muslims, Christians, Jewish, and any other non-Muslim communities.(Sekulow & Ash, 2014) Besides, what makes them even more dangerous is their ability to obtain sufficient assets and willingness to try to bring about the khilafa system back. Ironically this is appealing to numerous Muslims.

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