

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## ***The Islamic State: The New Jihad?***

ISIS or ISIL (The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [or in the Levant]) is arguably the most dangerous and ruthless expression of the doctrine of Islamic jihad in modern times. ISIS (or what is now more commonly referred to as simply the Islamic State) is a breakaway from al Qaeda and can only be understood in contrast to al Qaeda. Understanding ISIS is the main thrust of this edition of *Issues in Perspective*.

- First of all, ISIS is the culmination of a ten-year theological disagreement within al Qaeda. Al Qaeda (Arabic for “the base”) was the brainchild of Osama bin Laden in the 1980s during the Afghanistan war with the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union was defeated in that war, bin Laden turned on the western nations, principally the United States, when they occupied the sacred soil of Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War to drive Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait in the early 1990s. When bin Laden was killed by Navy SEALs, the Egyptian-born Ayman al-Zawahiri took over leadership of al Qaeda. The Al Qaeda affiliate in Iraq was taken over by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2010. Baghdadi and Zawahiri disagreed intensely over the nature of the jihad that al Qaeda was fighting. The rupture between these two leaders occurred when Baghdadi refused Zawahiri’s demand that he submit to the leadership of al Qaeda. Baghdadi in effect declared that Zawahiri and his leadership were antithetical to Allah and his clear commands about jihad in the Qur’an. Fundamentally, Baghdadi and Zawahiri disagree over the nature of the Islamic caliphate—the unified Islamic state to which all Muslims are to pledge allegiance and devotion, and which would be organized around a strict interpretation of Islamic law. [Osama bin Laden thought that Yemen was the most likely place where his supporters might declare the Islamic caliphate.] Zawahiri believes that the caliphate can emerge only after the broader Muslim world has been “purified.” *Wall Street Journal* investigative reporter Margaret Coker writes that “Zawahiri hopes to bring Muslims out of their unredeemed state of *jahiliyya*—the type of spiritual ignorance that existed before the Prophet—by excising all contact with corrupting Western influences and placing governing institutions in the hands of administrators who share this vision and can promulgate it to the mass of Muslims.” The break between Zawahiri and Baghdadi came on 9 April 2013 when Baghdadi launched his rebellion against al Qaeda’s leadership. In an audio recording released online, he declared a hostile takeover of the Nusra Front, a Syrian jihadist rebel militia linked to al Qaeda whose leader had pledged allegiance to al Qaeda and Zawahiri. Baghdadi declared that these two groups (the Nusra Front and al Qaeda) were merging into the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; hence ISIS was formed. Zawahiri then formally disowned ISIS. Baghdadi retorted that he had

“chosen the command of God over the command [of Zawahiri].” Indeed, Baghdadi rejects the doctrine of Zawahiri of building a consensus within Islam; he believes that a pure Islamic regime (a caliphate) must be imposed by force. He therefore has been in full ascent as the leader of radical Islam, for the military gains of ISIS are formidable. ISIS forces have solidified control over a major section of Iraq and Baghdadi is pursuing an aggressive recruitment campaign to motivate Islamic radicals to the ISIS cause. Under Baghdadi’s leadership, ISIS has engaged in ruthlessly brutal executions of Shiite Muslims, Christians and other non-Sunni Muslims. Large scale executions, beheadings and the gruesome executions of two American reporters have gained ISIS international attention, all of which aid their recruitment efforts. Baghdadi is bent on forcing all of Islam, and indeed the world, to take notice of his caliphate. Where al Qaeda has failed, he is succeeding.

- Second, ISIS is a sophisticated organization with technology skills far beyond anything al Qaeda has ever done. Scott Shane and Ben Hubbard of the *New York Times* write: “[W]hile ISIS may be built on bloodshed, it seems intent on demonstrating the bureaucratic acumen of the state it claims to be building. Its two annual reports so far are replete with a sort of jihadist-style bookkeeping, tracking statistics on everything from ‘cities taken over’ and ‘knife murders’ committed by ISIS forces to ‘checkpoints set up’ and even ‘apostates repented.’” ISIS also frames its mission in apocryphal terms. It argues that the nation states of the Middle East created by the Western powers after World War I are “crusader partitions” and that the current Arab leaders are part of the conquer-and-divide strategy which prevents Muslims from unifying “under one imam carrying the banner of truth.” Without question, the message of ISIS is one of “unstoppable power [that] animates all of its messaging.” In addition, Shane and Hubbard argue that “ISIS is online jihad 3.0. Dozens of Twitter accounts spread its message, and it has posted some major speeches in seven languages. Its videos borrow from Madison Avenue and Hollywood, from combat video games and cable television dramas, and its sensational dispatches are echoed and amplified on social media. When its accounts are blocked, new ones appear immediately.” Hassan Hassan, a Syrian analyst with the Delma Institute in Abu Dhabi, maintains that “ISIS tries to reflect an image of being the continuation of the system of the caliphate. In people’s minds, the caliphate is about victory and dignity of Muslims. A caliph is a defender of Muslims against the enemies from within and from without.” In addition, he argues, “ISIS’s emphasis on strict interpretation of Islamic law also draws support as does its portrayal of its battle in staunchly sectarian terms.” For that reason many Sunnis are sympathetic with ISIS for they have been oppressed by both the Iraqi and Syrian governments. Indeed, Terrence McCoy of the *Washington Post* captures the contrast between al Qaeda and ISIS well: “What was recently a ragtag cadre of former al Qaeda operatives has now morphed into a transnational, fully militarized and very rich operation said to control more than one-third of Syria’s territory. It makes al Qaeda look like a bunch of wannabe jihadists.” ISIS controls a volume of resources and territory unmatched in the history of extremist organizations.

ISIS is in fact the strongest piece of evidence one could muster that the entire Middle Eastern order that was a product of World War I is breaking down. The atrocities in Syria are almost unimaginable and this seemingly endless civil war is what gave rise to ISIS in the first place. ISIS has also advanced considerably against the incompetent army of Iraq, which has resulted in untold massacres of religious minorities and the establishment of a terrorist haven the size of New England. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates are all terrified by ISIS because an ISIS success across the Middle East would mean the end of their regimes. And, in the middle of this chaos stands the United States, perceived by almost all players in the region as weak, indecisive and ineffective. As columnist Michael Gerson argues, "This is what the complete collapse of a foreign policy doctrine looks like." If the Middle Eastern order is breaking down, does ISIS represent the vital center of the new order? May that not be so! But the United States and its allies in the region plus NATO must act decisively, strategically and soon! May God give our leaders immense wisdom in the weeks and months to come.

See Michael Gerson in [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) (13 August 2014); David Ignatius in [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) (13 August 2014); Terrence McCoy in [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) (6 August 2014); Scott Shane and Ben Hubbard in the *New York Times* (31 August 2014); and Margaret Coker in the *Wall Street Journal* (12-13 July 2014).