The Unanticipated Threat of ISIS: Rise, Growth, and Stability

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Abstract: The terrorist threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Sham (ISIS) was unanticipated by many. This paper argues that ISIS’ rise, growth and stability are largely a result of disenfranchisement in Iraq and Syria and financial stability. However, examination of the history and social conditions in Syria and Iraq demonstrate that the expansion of ISIS, or another organization similar to ISIS, was nearly inevitable. This paper provides an overview of ISIS’ rise by examining how the organization was able to initially gain support by capitalizing on disenfranchisement. This paper will also explain the growth and stability of ISIS by examining how the organization has been able to financially support itself.

Origins and Growth of ISIS

The main goal of the polyonomous terrorist group, known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Ash Sham, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State, and the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL), is to establish a caliphate by gaining control of areas in Iraq and Syria. The organization controls various areas under Sharia law, which covers both religious life and non-religious life. These laws include separating boys and girls in school, requiring women to be covered in full veil or niqab, and banning music. ¹

ISIS controls several wilayats, or regions, in Iraq and Syria, including the southern, Diyala, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Salahuddin, Anbar, and Ninewa divisions in Iraq, and the Al Barakah, Al Kheir, Al Raqqah, Al Badiya, Halab, Idlib, Hama, Damascus, and Coast divisions in Syria. ISIS’ organizational structure very much resembles a state. The group has a leader and this leader has a cabinet of advisors and two deputies. ISIS also places governors in charge of different areas under its control. Overall, the organization’s organizational structure strongly resembles the structure of a state and shows ISIS’ ambitions to become a state. The following graphic further illustrates ISIS’ organizational structure. ²

² Ibid.
Remnants of ISIS arose in October 2006 when the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) announced the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an affiliate of Al Qaeda, and established Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its leader. Later, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed in a US air strike and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took control of ISI. Bakr al-Baghdadi was formerly the general supervisor of the Sharia Committees for the Wilayats. With his eyes set on expanding ISI into Syria, Bakr al-Baghdadi proved to be more extreme, ambitious, and disloyal than his predecessor. Signals of Bakr al-Baghdadi’s disloyalty to Al Qaeda arose when he announced the absorption of an Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. In April 2013, Bakr al-Baghdadi declared that ISI absorbed the Syrian militant group Jabhat al Nusra li Ahl al Sham (al Nusra) and that this signaled the birth of a new group that spanned across Syria and Iraq. The group would be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Sham (ISIS). This marked the creation of ISIS. On June 30, 2014, ISIS announced the creation of a Caliphate, an Islamic State. After the announcement, Bakr al-Baghdadi changed his name to Caliph Ibrahim and the name of ISIS was changed to the Islamic State.

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Systematic Disenfranchisement in Syria

Due to disenfranchisement among various groups of people in both Iraq and Syria, ISIS has been able to gain a stronghold in these two countries. ISIS’ ability to be successful in Syria is largely due to the Syrian civil war. The Syrian civil war started because many Syrians have been suffering from disenfranchisement. Much of Syria’s problems have risen from the corruption so prevalent in Syria. According to Transparency International, Syria has consistently had a low corruption perception index (CPI). Syria’s CPI when calculated on a scale of zero (very corrupt) to 10 (very clean) scored less than 3.5 between 2003 and 2011. Since 2012, when the CPI scale went from zero (very corrupt) to 100 (very clean), Syria has consistently scored below 30. Extreme corruption in Syria has led to business people’s investment costs rising 26-30% which has negatively affected the costs and standards of living among the Syrian population.

The living conditions of Syrians were exasperated when a drought in Syria forced farmers to look for work in the city. Many of these farmers were unable to make an adequate living in the city. In fact, it is estimated that two to three million of Syria’s ten million rural citizens were sent into extreme poverty.

Systematic Disenfranchisement in Iraq

Much of the support ISIS has gained in Iraq started from policies instituted by US diplomat Paul Bremer. After the US invasion of Iraq, Bremer gained authoritative control of

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Iraq. While controlling Iraq, he issued two decrees. The first was to outlaw Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath party, which mostly consisted of Sunnis, from government positions. The second was to disband the Iraqi army and intelligence services. These decrees were devastating for Iraq. Many people in Iraq were Ba’athists only because it was a requirement for political office. The outlawing of Ba’athists led to the loss of jobs for 85,000 to 100,000 people. The decision to disband Iraq’s army and intelligence services led to around 700,000 Iraqi military personnel and police officers losing employment. Many of these people began to work for terrorist organizations to provide money for their families.\(^\text{12}\)

In order to combat the security problems in Iraq, the US military began to support the Sahwa. The Sahwa was a tribal movement in Iraq that formed in 2005. The movement was formalized in 2006 when the al-Anbar Salvation Council was created.\(^\text{13}\) The al-Anbar Salvation Council was an alliance of clans, led by Abd al-Sattar al-Rishawi, which provided help to the Iraqi government and US military.\(^\text{14}\) The Sahwa movement first consisted of mostly Sunni Arab tribes that had been in conflict with Al Qaeda due to Al Qaeda’s extreme violence and the organization’s targeted killings of tribal leaders. The Sahwa later grew to include Sunni Arab fighters, some of whom were former insurgents. The US provided tribes that were part of the Sahwa with arms and financial resources to fight Al Qaeda. In the process, these tribes and their leaders gained authority in several areas of Iraq. However, when the US began to withdraw from areas of Iraq, members of the Sahwa movement faced many retaliatory attacks from Al Qaeda. One retaliatory attack led to the death of Abd al-Sattar al-Rishawi. These retaliatory attacks combined with intimidations and threats convinced many Sahwa members to return to Al Qaeda’s ranks.\(^\text{15}\)

When the US left Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki became prime minister. Maliki drew on the provisions instituted by Bremer to reinforce his power. This led to the continual oppression of the Sunni population. For example, Maliki used Bremer’s policies to bar prominent Sunnis from political office. This resulted in riots breaking out in Iraq’s Sunni occupied areas. Maliki responded to these riots by further repressing the Sunni population. Maliki also used Shiite backed militias supported by Iran to stop riots, which further angered the Sunni population. These militias were accused of committing mass rape and sectarian reprisals against the Sunni population. As a result of the Sunnis’ history of being oppressed in Iraq, many Sunnis now support ISIS.\(^\text{16}\)

**Financing Terror**

Successful financing practices and an abundance of funds are required to succeed in terror operations, and ISIS is not in short supply of either. ISIS must have enough money to pay

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\(^\text{15}\) Benraad, "Iraq's Tribal "Sahwa".

personnel, undertake operations, manage territory, and support the eight million people under its control. Without the money to cover these costs, ISIS would not be able to function as it currently does. The organization uses many different methods to raise funds. According to the US Department of Treasury's Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, David Cohen, most of ISIS' revenue comes from local criminal and terrorist activities. In 2014, the US Department of Treasury estimated that ISIS received at least $20 million in ransoms alone. ISIS' revenue streams primarily consist of the sale of oil, extortion, the sale of stolen antiquities, and kidnappings.

Much of ISIS’ funds come from illegally controlling oil fields in Iraq and Syria. It was estimated that ISIS earned around $1 million per day from the sale of oil in 2014. According to Cohen, the Syrian government also made an arrangement with ISIS to purchase oil from fields and refineries that were previously under Syrian control. This large amount of money ISIS receives from selling oil is one of the many factors that has allowed ISIS to be self-sufficient.

ISIS also gains funds from the trafficking of artifacts. It is estimated that the organization receives US $200 million from the selling of artifacts. In addition to ISIS members selling these artifacts, ISIS also uses local residents to obtain artifacts from ancient sites. The organization does this by issuing permits to local citizens to search for artifacts in ancient sites. ISIS then charges a percentage of the money citizens receive from selling artifacts.

In regards to kidnapping, ISIS’ victims come from countries around the world, including France and the United States. These victims are often people, such as journalists, that travelled to ISIS controlled areas. France has actually paid $14 million in ransoms for kidnapped journalists. On the other hand, the United States has not paid ransoms. This has led to American hostages being beheaded while French hostages have been spared. The US government has explained that that they are not paying for hostages because of the premise that a no-concessions policy lowers the amount of kidnappings by removing the incentive to holding hostages. ISIS has also kidnapped women and children and forced them into sexual slavery. A report by Amnesty International explains that ISIS abducted many people from the Yezidi minority group. The Yezidi minority group makes up the majority of people in ISIS’ slave trade. After being

19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 U.S. Department of Treasury, "Remarks of Under Secretary”.
23 Singer
25 U.S. Department of Treasury, "Remarks of Under Secretary”.
abducted, some of these people are sold to buyers while others are forcibly married and given as gifts.\(^{26}\)

**Conclusion**

ISIS’ ability to capitalize on disenfranchisement and the organization’s lucrative revenue streams have led to the organization growing more powerful. For example, ISIS began in Iraq as an affiliate of Al-Qaeda. Due to disenfranchisement in Iraq, many people in Iraq began to support ISIS.\(^{27}\) When disenfranchisement in Syria led to civil war, ISIS capitalized on this disenfranchisement by expanding into Syria and gaining support from Syria’s disenfranchised population.\(^{28}\) While the organization was expanding and gaining territory, the organization was financing its activities by gaining funds from various revenue streams, including the sale of oil, extortion, the sale of stolen antiquities, and kidnappings.\(^{29}\)

ISIS’ revenue streams have allowed the organization to finance its costs which include maintaining and administrating territory\(^ {30}\) and paying recruits.\(^ {31}\) Without financing these costs, the organization could not maintain its current structure. In theory, it can cost up to billions of dollars to maintain and administrate territory. Therefore, for ISIS to maintain and administrate territory, the organization must have a large amount of funds. Without these funds the organization would not be able to hold onto territory.\(^ {32}\) Additionally, if ISIS stopped paying their personnel then the disenfranchised people that joined ISIS would not have much reason to continue to support ISIS. This is because the disenfranchised people that joined ISIS would once again be disenfranchised if they were not able to earn a living from ISIS. As a result, the amount of people supporting ISIS and employed by ISIS would likely decrease if ISIS stopped paying its personnel.

The disenfranchisement in Iraq and Syria and ISIS’ financing activities are significant problems that must be addressed. If ISIS receives less funds, then the organization would not be able to maintain its current costs, which could lead to ISIS becoming less powerful or dissolving. However, if the disenfranchisement in Iraq and Syria is not addressed when ISIS loses power, then another organization that is similar to ISIS may rise by taking advantage of the disenfranchised population in Iraq and Syria. Further research should explore these issues and investigate how to best address disenfranchisement in Iraq and Syria while effectively degrading ISIS’ financial strength. Overall, the disenfranchisement in Iraq and Syria and the potential funds available from local criminal and terrorist activities are a dangerous combination that could have led to the rise of any violent organization that saw the chance to take advantage of the situations in Iraq and Syria. Since ISIS decided to take advantage of the situations in Iraq and Syria, this organization gained the benefits, power and influence.


\(^{29}\) U.S. Department of Treasury, "Remarks of Under Secretary”.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Gómez, "A Financial Profile”.

\(^{32}\) U.S. Department of Treasury, "Remarks of Under Secretary”.

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Bibliography


