NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES PROGRAM POLICY PAPER

REDEFINING THE ISLAMIC STATE

The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq

BRIAN FISHMAN, AUGUST 2011

Executive Summary

Despite dramatic security improvements since 2006, terrorism is still rampant in Iraq. According to statistics compiled by the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), between January 2008 and the end of 2010, more than 300 people were killed every month in 200 acts of terrorism—each figure higher than in any other country in the world. These facts might strike many people as counterintuitive, because Iraq no longer receives the attention it once did from global media. Moreover, American assessments of Iraq tend to focus on sectarian violence rather than terrorism as a measure of instability, which can be misleading. Whereas sectarian violence was the dominant form of fighting in Iraq in 2006 and 2007, when the country was at its most unstable, it has been dramatically reduced. That progress is important and serious, but over-reliance on evaluations of sectarian violence for understanding the current conflict in Iraq fails to adequately account for the conflict's evolution. As the United States and Iraqi governments debate whether U.S. troops should remain in Iraq after December 2011,

policymakers in Washington should not assume that violent actors in Iraq will hew to the political and tactical contours of 2006.

That is particularly true for al-Qaeda's Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which has evolved substantially in the last five years—mostly because of dramatic defeats inflicted by Iraqi tribal groups and the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy implemented in 2007 and 2008. As a result of those setbacks, the ISI has eschewed efforts to control territory and impose governance—initiatives that left it extremely vulnerable to counterinsurgency techniques—and adopted a more traditional terrorist model built on an underground organization and occasional large-scale attacks. The ISI's resilience has also been facilitated by shifts in U.S. and Iraqi policy, including the withdrawal of U.S. forces to large bases and the shift of U.S. Special Operations Forces to Afghanistan.

The ISI increasingly resembles other al-Qaeda franchises that are more focused on terrorist attacks as opposed to the ISI of 2006, which was unique in its ambitious concentration on controlling territory and building a governance structure. The ISI's new approach raises the possibility that it will emulate al-Qaeda franchises in other ways, including by trying to conduct attacks in the West. There is no definitive evidence that the ISI is increasing investment in such operations, but senior U.S. law enforcement personnel have raised the possibility in recent months, likely in response to revelations about ISI networks in the West, including an alleged facilitator of

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foreign fighters who was recently arrested in Canada, and following the indictment of two Iraqi refugees in Kentucky arrested in a sting operation involving logistical support to the ISI.

The ISI's future is particularly ambiguous because of its broad strategic shift over the past three years and leadership changes brought on by the deaths of two key leaders in April 2010. Moreover, communications with al-Qaeda's central leadership—which played an important role in shaping the group's territory-focused strategy—is opaque. Despite the continuing uncertainty, the ISI's resilience and evolution lead to several key findings:

The ISI is increasingly likely to attempt violent operations outside Iraq, including in the West. There are several reasons for this shift. First, the ISI's reduced focus on territory will require less manpower from abroad, which may therefore be redirected toward external targets. Second, as the United States becomes less exposed financially, politically, and militarily in Iraq, the ISI will have to look outside Iraq's borders to engage directly in al-Qaeda's global strategy of bleeding and weakening the United States. Third, the ISI has suffered serious damage to its reputation, and attacking Western targets outside Iraq is the most reliable way to reverse the weakness in its brand. Fourth, al-Qaeda has embraced a strategic concept that encourages individuals and groups to strike at the West whenever possible, which suggests it may be less likely to restrain ISI efforts to attack outside of Iraq than it was previously. The ISI does have limitations that constrain its ability to operate in the West, most notably an absence of established cells, but also the lack of a charismatic ideological figure to radicalize Western recruits, such as Anwar al-Awlaki. This suggests that ISI operations in the West are likely to evolve from more structured networks—either formulated in Iraq among ISI members with mobility abroad, out of Iraqi Diaspora communities with family ties to Iraq, or from existing fundraising and recruitment networks that focused previously on ushering resources into Iraq.

The ISI benefits from Iraqi political dysfunction. Political instability in Iraq, especially that which marginalizes or disenfranchises the Sunni community, creates conditions the ISI can exploit. Although the Iraqi army is increasingly effective and is likely to be supported by U.S. advisors for the foreseeable future, there is little reason to believe that an Iraqi state with an immature political culture, a slew of violent opponents, and weak police forces will be able to stamp out the ISI.

Population-centric counterinsurgency has limited utility against militant networks organized primarily for terrorism rather than insurgency. The continued prevalence of terrorism in Iraq reveals the limitations of U.S.-led counterinsurgency operations and raises questions about the utility of COIN in operations designed to defeat groups that are not focused on territory and establishing authority amongst a local population. The U.S. counterinsurgency successes over the ISI came at a time when it was attempting to hold territory and had overreached terribly in its relationship with Iraq's Sunnis. The ISI's strategic and operational adjustments—retracting into regions where organic social unrest prevented stabilization, reducing its overall numbers, and increasing discipline—reduced the group's vulnerability to counterinsurgency techniques designed to mobilize large segments of the population. Terrorist groups can survive, and even thrive, with far fewer supporters than groups attempting to control territory and govern.

Observing the limitations of counterinsurgency is not the same as condemning the doctrine or criticizing its use in either Iraq or Afghanistan. But counterinsurgency is inadequate for defeating militant networks primarily organized for terrorism, even when it includes so-called counterterrorism operations conducted by Special Operations Forces (SOF). Local governments are likely to oppose such operations if domestic militant groups do not pose an existential threat to the government. Relying on SOF to achieve counterterrorism missions obscures critical

political factors that could limit the utility of that course of action.

The ISI's resilience in the face of the reasonably successful COIN campaign in Iraq suggests that U.S. policymakers should expect that al-Qaeda elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan will be equally durable. Even a successful outcome of the COIN effort in Afghanistan is unlikely to prevent al-Qaeda or other international terrorist groups from utilizing Afghan territory for safe haven and planning purposes.

These findings in turn suggest several key recommendations:

American analysts should monitor the ISI's personnel system and leadership statements for indicators of its strategic direction. It is a truism of American politics that "personnel is policy"; the same is often true in terrorist organizations. In past years, the ISI did not prioritize identifying recruits with the capacity to operate effectively in the West, which reflected the group's focus on Iraq. Enhanced efforts to identify recruits with Western passports or the ability to maneuver in the West would indicate that the ISI is shifting its strategic focus. ISI efforts to systematically identify and/or manipulate Iraqis with family members abroad would also be an indication of its intent. Additionally, ISI leadership statements are still a useful way of understanding the group's strategic direction. In recent years, leadership statements have been key indicators of the group's focus on targeting Christians and its renewed effort to attack Shi'a in Iraq.

U.S. assessments of the ISI—and Iraq—should use updated metrics. Changes in the ISI's structure and strategy have made previous metrics of the group's strength less valuable, especially the amount of ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq. The United States needs new analytical paradigms for understanding the ISI: Specifically, the group should increasingly be measured by the standards of a terrorist organization rather than an insurgent group. Analysis of the ISI that focuses primarily on whether the

group will strengthen into something similar to the organization that haunted Iraq in 2006 is likely to miss the other threats it poses, especially to targets outside Iraq

By the standard often used to define success in counterinsurgency—eliminating a movement's ability to threaten the viability of the state—the victories over the ISI in 2007 and 2008 constitute something close to success. But the ISI's persistence demonstrates that that standard is inadequate for securing core U.S. interests, because the group still has the potential to utilize Iraqi territory as a base for attacks even as the Iraqi government consolidates its authority. Defining victory in Iraq in traditional terms ignores al-Qaeda's unique predilection to use terrorist tactics to target U.S. interests without posing an existential threat to the state. Viewed as an insurgent organization, the ISI has been defeated. Viewed as a transnational terrorist group, it is vibrant.

Increasingly emphasize disrupting rather than monitoring ISI support networks. A key debate among counterterrorism practitioners is whether to disrupt low-level terrorist support networks or monitor them for intelligence that leads to more important targets. In the past, emphasis on monitoring of ISI networks outside of Iraq was probably justified, but if the ISI does attempt to activate those networks for violence in the West, practitioners should increasingly emphasize disruption.

Do not stigmatize Iraqi refugee and immigrant communities. ISI networks in the West are likely to be composed of people with direct ties to Iraq. Rather than instituting selective and potentially discriminatory policies for these communities, political leaders, government officials from a range of agencies, civil society figures, and counterterrorism practitioners should engage them directly and continually on many subjects. The goal should be to reassure and welcome a traumatized community, and in doing so reassure people capable of providing information about the very limited number of bad actors. Hyperbolic descriptions of the threat and intrusive surveillance are

likely to make the community as a whole more insular rather than facilitate cooperation with authorities.

Introduction

There is no doubt that al-Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) successor organization, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), is weaker than it was when created in 2006. But measuring the ISI of 2011 by the standards established in 2006 gives a misleading picture of the threat it continues to pose. The group's strategy and operational model have changed significantly. AQI is remembered primarily for encouraging sectarian violence in Iraq. But AQI also aimed to build a distinct Islamic state in western Iraq while embarrassing the United States as part of al-Qaeda's global war. These divergent goals contributed to AQI's weakness and heavily influenced its collapse after 2006. Understanding AQI today means understanding its evolution since 2006—in particular the group's decreased focus on holding territory, reduced effort to build a wide social base, and evolving (though quite indistinct) relationship with al-Qaeda's senior leadership in Pakistan.

Understanding the ISI's evolution is particularly important as the U.S. and Iraqi governments debate whether U.S. troops will remain in Iraq after December 2011.[1] A reduction in U.S. capacity to assist Iraqi security forces will affect ISI operational decisions—most likely by decreasing operational pressure but perhaps also by reducing the group's ability to raise funds and attract recruits from abroad. Certainly the ISI's utility to al-Qaeda's central leadership will change. What use will the ISI be to al-Qaeda if it is not to counter an American occupation? How will that affect the ISI's propaganda? Most importantly, how will it alter ISI operations? It remains unclear whether the Iraqi government will accept U.S. offers to retain approximately 10,000 troops in Iraq after the December 2011 deadline to withdraw. Whatever the Iraqi government decides, the American moment in Iraq is over. For al-Qaeda's operation in Iraq, that is a mixed blessing: Its political ambitions were defeated and its original raison d'être is withdrawing, but in

its place are a weak government, virtually infinite sectarian grievances, and an Iraq increasingly tied to the global economy. In other words: opportunity.

This paper explores the contemporary status of the ISI in two sections. The first examines data on the continued prevalence of terrorism in Iraq despite dramatic improvements in security and the near elimination of sectarian violence.[a] The second explores the formation of the ISI in 2006, reviews its decline in 2007-08, and surveys the strategic shifts that explain its resilience thereafter. Finally, it offers recommendations for policymakers about how to confront a weaker ISI that may be more disposed to attacking the West directly than its more powerful predecessors.

Part 1: The Persistence of Terrorism in Iraq

In 2010, the Department of Defense recorded very few incidents of ethno-sectarian violence, but 300 people were killed every month in acts of terrorism.[2] Nonetheless, assessments of Iraq often focus on the overall number of attacks and the amount of ethno-sectarian fighting, rather than terrorism, as the primary metrics for understanding the security situation in Iraq, a disconnect that leads many to overstate security gains in that country. Deputy Secretary of Defense Colin Kahl's argument in August 2010 is representative:

> The numbers do not lie. Despite occasional spikes, overall levels of attacks and Iraqi civilian casualties have remained relatively constant at their lowest levels of the post-2003 period for more than two years. ... The number of weekly security incidents has remained below January 2004 levels, and overall levels of violence are far below that

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[a] For NCTC's criteria as to what constitutes a terrorist attack, see: http://www.nctc.gov/witsbanner/wits_subpage_criteria.html

experienced in 2006 and 2007. Ethno-sectarian deaths have also plummeted. And over this same period, ISF and U.S. military fatalities have steeply declined.[3]

Kahl's analysis is correct, but incomplete. Overall violence has declined dramatically and ethno-sectarian violence, which wracked Iraq at its most unstable in 2006 and 2007, has been virtually eliminated. The problem is that not all types of violence are equal. Terrorism is a tactic specifically designed to produce outsized political impact from limited operational events. The continued prevalence of terrorist attacks, and the political impact they create, is hidden by inclusion within other metrics of violence in Iraq.
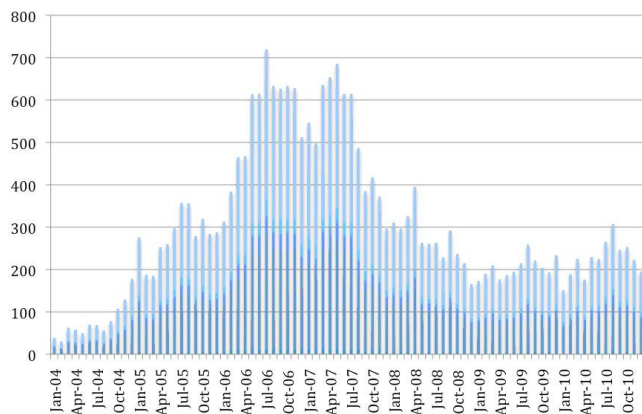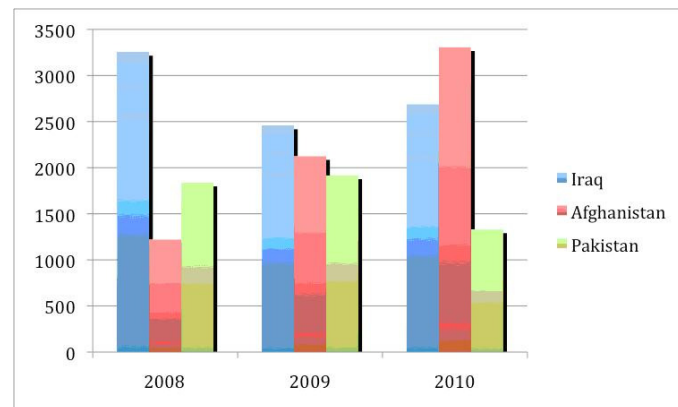
Figure 1: Monthly Terrorist Attacks in Iraq January 2004-2010[4]

Terrorist incidents in Iraq have declined along with ethno-sectarian violence, but they can only be considered "limited" by the distorted standards of a state that recently experienced an extraordinary spasm of internecine bloodletting. Figure 1 illustrates that the number of monthly terrorist attacks in Iraq fell from nearly 700 at their peak to around 200 per month in mid-2008. It has remained relatively constant since. The 300 or so deaths they caused per month is far fewer than the deaths from terrorism during the peak of violence in 2007, but the casualty rate is still extremely high for a country of only 24 million people. If the 2010 per capita rate of terrorism deaths in Iraq occurred in a U.S.-sized population, more than 3100 people

would be killed every month, more than were killed on 9/11.[5]

As Figure 2 demonstrates, the total number of terrorist incidents in Iraq in 2008, 2009, and 2010 exceeded those in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which ranked second and third globally in terms of overall terrorist incidents during the period. Not surprisingly, more people in Iraq were killed by terrorist attacks than in Afghanistan or Pakistan over the same timeframe.[b]
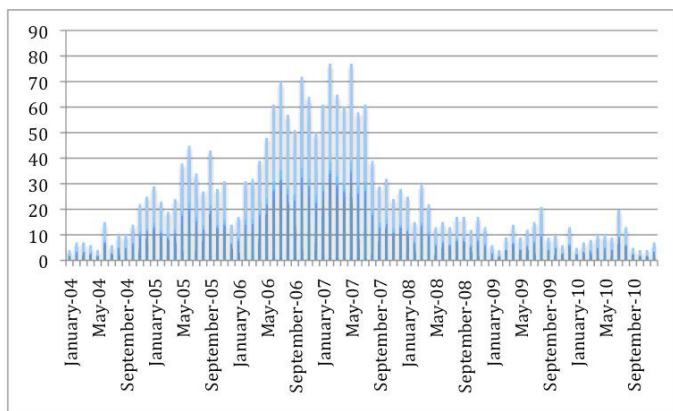
Figure 2: Terrorist Attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan 2008-2010

Although terrorism remains widespread in Iraq, major incidents of terrorism—defined here as events that kill more than five people—have declined since 2008. From January 2004 through December 2010, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) counted 2,127 major

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[b] There was a precipitous drop in the number of suicide attacks in Iraq from 2007 (353) to 2010 (75), but the latter figure is still very high in comparison to conflicts that currently attract far more attention. In 2010, there were 102 suicide attacks in Afghanistan and 51 in Pakistan. See Appendix A for chart. In 2008, 5,013 people were killed by terrorist attacks in Iraq, 1,997 in Afghanistan, and 2,293 in Pakistan. In 2009, 3,654 people were killed by terrorist attacks in Iraq, 2,778 in Afghanistan and 2,293 in Pakistan. In 2010, 3,364 people were killed by terrorist attacks in Iraq, 3,202 in Afghanistan, and 2,150 in Pakistan.

terrorist incidents in Iraq—about 9 percent of all terrorist attacks. Figure 3 demonstrates that the number of major terrorist incidents declined dramatically in Iraq in keeping with the broader reduction of violence in mid-2007. In 2008 there were 209 major terrorism incidents; in 2009 there were 128, and in 2010 there were 102.

The general decline of major terrorist events in Iraq is good news, but even the reduced level is very high. Figure 4 shows that major terrorism events remained more prevalent in Iraq than in either Afghanistan or Pakistan until early 2009, when such attacks shot up in Afghanistan.

Figure 3: Major (5 or more killed) Terrorism Incidents in Iraq 2004-2010

Measuring terrorism alone offers a narrow window on the full scope of the conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan, but the finding that terrorism remains persistent in Iraq is worrisome because the counterinsurgency campaign there has largely been deemed a success. Iraq therefore not only receives less attention and resources than Afghanistan and Pakistan, but serves as a rough blueprint for the kind of end state that many hope for in Afghanistan.[6] That is troubling because the original purpose of intervening in Afghanistan and Iraq was to prevent terrorist groups from operating there, especially al-Qaeda. Despite the progress in Iraq, terrorism remains rampant, including from al-Qaeda.
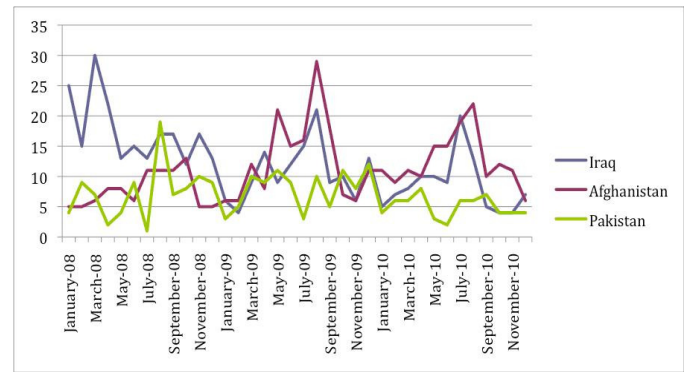
Figure 4: Major Terrorism Incidents in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan 2008-2010

Determining how much of the terrorist violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan should be ascribed to al-Qaeda is difficult. Conclusively determining the perpetrator of a terrorist attack in complex environments is extremely challenging, and the official NCTC data generally does not identify attackers. Thus it is not clear what percentage of contemporary terrorist incidents in Iraq are conducted by the ISI. Other Sunni militant groups and Shia militias, such as Kataib Hizballah, the Promised Day Brigades, and Asaib al-Haq, are certainly responsible for a major portion of Iraq's continuing violence. But anecdotal evidence suggests that the ISI is responsible for a significant portion of the terrorism—and the overall level of terrorist violence offers some insight into how amenable the environment is to ISI planning and organizing. The ISI has claimed credit for a wide array of attacks in the past three years, and it is widely recognized that Salafi-Jihadi militant groups, such as the ISI, conduct most of the suicide bombings in the Iraqi context, of which there were 75 in 2010.[7]

Perhaps that is why the U.S ambassador to Iraq, James Jeffrey, and the commander of U.S. Forces-Iraq, Gen. Lloyd Austin, referred to al-Qaeda as "Iraq's most dangerous enemy" in early 2011, though they also noted the role played by Shi'a militias such as Kataib Hizballah, the Promised Day Brigades, and Asaib al-Haq.[8]

Part 2: The Persistence of the Islamic State of Iraq

The ISI began to alter its strategy and operational model in 2008, enabling the group to sustain a viable presence in Iraq despite suffering major setbacks in the two years since it was established. The ISI is no longer the wildly ambitious group it was in 2006, when it was declared as an independent al-Qaeda dominated state in western Iraq—something that other al-Qaeda franchises have not attempted. No longer is the group focused operationally on claiming territory and political power (though that remains an oft-stated long-term goal); it has now embraced a much more traditional mode of terrorist operations—intermittent and very bloody attacks designed not to dominate a polity in the short run, but to destabilize one.

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Rather than focus on the well-understood sources of the ISI's decline, this assessment looks at the group's strategic alignment that led to its 2006-2008 crisis and the operational shifts that helped it recover and evolve afterwards.

The High Command, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, and the Islamic State

Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the founder and first emir, or leader, of AQI, did not always see eye to eye with al-Qaeda's senior leaders. However, much (though not all) of the observable disconnect between al-Qaeda Central's strategic guidance and Zarqawi's behavior in Iraq can be attributed to prosaic communication difficulties rather than lingering ideological disagreement or personal resentment. Al-Qaeda's central leadership exerted important strategic guidance over AQI when able to communicate effectively. Critically, al-Qaeda's new emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, played an important role establishing the ISI, which turned out to be a major strategic error.[9]

Communication Breakdown: It's Always the Same

Al-Zarqawi entered Iraq in 2002 as the leader of a militant group called Tawhid wal Jihad, and did not form AQI and swear allegiance to Osama bin Laden until October 2004. By that time, his cruel violence and media savvy had earned him a massive following among supporters of global jihad and fear from many Iraqis. At this early stage, al-Zarqawi and then-al-Qaeda deputy al-Zawahiri had different theories of socio-political change, which influenced their preferred strategies in Iraq.[10] Zarqawi believed society itself was corrupt, and he therefore used violence to terrify, radicalize, and purge it without giving much thought to subsequent institutional change.[11] Al-Zawahiri believed Muslim populations were less problematic, and focused on replacing political institutions that he felt were imposing un-Islamic doctrine. For that reason, al-Zawahiri urged al-Zarqawi to build a political coalition capable of seizing power when the United States left Iraq, a development he believed was imminent in mid-2005.[12]

Al-Zawahiri's convictions were revealed publicly in October 2005 when the U.S. Director of National Intelligence released an intercepted letter from al-Zawahiri urging al-Zarqawi to prepare for establishing an Islamic state.[13] Dated July 2005, the letter called on al-Zarqawi to build a broader insurgent coalition, stop publicizing brutal attacks on Shi'a and Sunni enemies, and put an Iraqi face on AQI's operation.[14]

It was not the first time a senior al-Qaeda leader suggested that the time for declaring an Islamic state in Iraq was near. Two months before al-Zawahiri wrote his letter to al-Zarqawi, the newspaper *Al-Quds al-Arabi* published an

essay by longtime al-Qaeda figure Sayf al-Adel telling the story of Zarqawi's rise to prominence within al-Qaeda.[15] Al-Adel offered instructions to the leader of AQI, writing that "the circumstances are appropriate to declare this (Islamic) state. The beleaguered people of our nation have become aware of the circumstances surrounding them. The atheism of the regimes and governments ruling our Arab and Islamic world is obvious."[16]

Whether al-Zawahiri's letter was prompted by al-Adel is unclear, but al-Zarqawi's immediate response to the al-Zawahiri letter after it was released was definite: Like many American policy analysts at the time, he dismissed it as a fraud.[17] AQI said as much after the letter was released, arguing that the letter had "no foundation except in the imagination of the politicians of the Black House and their slaves."[18] Needless to say, al-Zarqawi did not implement al-Zawahiri's recommended reforms, a fact that is sometimes cited as evidence of his intransigence toward al-Qaeda's direction.[19]

The truth is probably more complicated. Al-Zarqawi may never have received a copy of al-Zawahiri's note, and honestly believed that the letter released by the United States was a fraud rather than purposefully rejecting instruction from his leadership. Indeed, Zarqawi eventually did implement al-Zawahiri's instructions, but only after the original letter's authenticity was confirmed by key al-Qaeda leaders Atiyah abd al-Rahman and Abu Yahya al-Libi after AQI bombed three hotels in Amman, Jordan, in November 2005.[20]

Al-Zarqawi's response was almost immediate. In January 2006, AQI established the Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC), an umbrella coalition supposedly capable of seizing political authority in Iraq if the United States were to withdraw.[21] As al-Zawahiri requested, the coalition was supposedly to be led by an Iraqi. Moreover, al-Zarqawi dramatically reduced his own public posture. In the six months between July and December 2005, he released at least 10 statements through AQI's media apparatus[22]; from

January 1, 2006, until his death in early June 2006, he released three.[23]

Declaring the Islamic State

Al-Zawahiri's strategic vision for AQI became operative in January 2006, but al-Zarqawi's death six months later was a chance to reinforce and deepen AQI's focus on political institutions and territory. In his eulogy for al-Zarqawi, al-Zawahiri urged the remaining AQI leadership to establish an "Islamic State of Iraq."[24] They did just that on October 15, 2006, even parroting al-Zawahiri's terminology (*Dawlat al-'Iraq al-Islamiyya*) despite other plausible linguistic options such as *emarah* (emirate) or the *Bilad al-Rafidayn* (Land of Two Rivers) construction used in AQI's formal title (*Tanzim al-Qa'idat fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*).[25] The establishment of the ISI was the culmination of a shift in strategy from al-Zarqawi-driven social purges to a more al-Zawahiri-esque political model aimed at establishing territorially rooted political institutions.

These strategic differences have had little impact at the tactical level, but they matter a great deal for the organization's relationship with the wider population. The CIA's *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency* identifies a focus on territory as a key distinguishing factor between insurgent and terrorist organizations, noting that "the common denominator of most insurgent groups is their desire to control a particular area. This objective differentiates insurgent groups from purely terrorist organizations, whose objectives do not include the creation of an alternative government capable of controlling a given area or country."[26] Whereas terrorist groups only need support from very small segments of the population and can engage the vast majority indirectly through violence or propaganda, insurgents working to build political institutions must engage a wider cross-section of the population—either constructively or coercively—to establish and enforce political authority.

After the ISI was created in 2006, it announced its control over territory in western Iraq, established a cabinet, described judicial procedures, demanded that tribal groups accept its authority, and explained in detail its process for choosing political leaders.[27] A previously unknown figure, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, was appointed emir, and Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir (Abu Ayyub al-Masri) was named minister of war. According to the ISI's political framework, al-Qaeda in Iraq ceased to exist and its fighters were subsumed as soldiers in a religiously governed, Iraq-based state.[28]

Retrenchment of the Islamic State of Iraq

Al-Qaeda's effort to establish a state in Iraq was an unmitigated disaster.[29] The ISI's core problem was that it was (and is) torn among three constituencies: Iraqi tribal groups that primarily wanted security and local autonomy, foreign jihadi supporters who reveled in the images of jihadi triumphs, and al-Qaeda leaders like Zawahiri who wanted Iraq to serve as a laboratory for jihadi governance. Balancing multiple constituencies is difficult for even the most nuanced politicians; not surprisingly, the ISI's rigid ideology and blunt style meant it was not well suited for such a delicate dance. The group ultimately alienated, frustrated, or lost the trust of all three factions.

The project to establish a real jihadi polity in Iraq was defeated by late 2007, but the ISI subsequently undertook a series of strategic shifts that have allowed it to stay relevant, rebuild its capacity for violence, and remain an important node of the global jihadi movement. First, beginning in late 2007, the group tried (somewhat unsuccessfully) to increase discipline and establish ideological standards for its fighters. Second, as the western province of Anbar grew increasingly hostile, the bulk of ISI operators retreated north to the city of Mosul, where they were able to take advantage of ethnic tensions between Arab and Kurdish factions. Third, al-Baghdadi raised his public profile, and the group as a whole began a vigorous defense of the ISI as an institution. Fourth, the group capitalized on simmering Sunni disillusionment with dysfunctional Iraqi politics to reestablish itself closer Baghdad in late 2008 and 2009, while adopting an operational model that emphasized large-scale strikes against Iraqi institutions rather than defending specific territory. Fifth, the ISI used frustration among former Sunni insurgents that had joined government-sanctioned militias to re-recruit former insurgents and revitalize networks in the Iraqi heartland.

The ISI's efforts to rebuild its organization since 2008 have also been facilitated by a number of shifts in U.S. and Iraqi strategy. The U.S. withdrawal of forces to major bases in summer 2009 in accordance with the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement reduced the risk to ISI fighters from American military operations, as did the decision to shift U.S. Special Operations Forces from Iraq to Afghanistan.[30] Some sources have also blamed the release of prisoners from U.S. or Iraqi custody for breathing new life into the ISI.[31]

Addressing the Challenge of Discipline

Leadership was a major problem for the ISI after the death of Zarqawi. His successors failed to attract the same respect he did, which compounded the challenges posed by the group's increasingly ambitious political claims and ever more complex security environment. The ISI was still attracting new members—both foreign and Iraqi—after Zarqawi's death, but the group's demanding operational pace and less assertive leadership meant that many did not receive extensive training or indoctrination.[32]   Likewise, fundraising and spending decisions were made at the regional level rather than by an efficient center—a model that likely increased security but meant that ill-trained regional commanders defined the ISI's posture in Iraq, and many of them undermined the group's larger goals by angering tribes or stealing from the population.[33]

Lack of secure communication systems exacerbated the problem by preventing the ISI's leadership from exerting influence over rogue operators within the organization.[34]

Unable to command or monitor its soldiers, the ISI's leadership issued two sets of general guidelines in September 2007 for "commanders" and "soldiers" that appear designed to limit the excessive violence that had alienated the group from so many Iraqis. Released two years before the Afghan Taliban distributed a much more famous code of conduct to its followers, the ISI instructions offered advice on a range of ideological questions (when can you declare another Muslim *kufr*—an apostate—and kill him?) and tactics ("I don't allow three to sleep without a night guard") for followers making key decisions independent of a hierarchical chain of command.[35]

Discipline remained a theme for ISI leaders through early 2008 when al-Muhajir warned his followers to "purge" their ranks of fighters driven by material gain.[36] He also emphasized the importance of unity within the ranks of the ISI and demanded that soldiers follow their leaders' commands. In an October 2008 statement called *The Prophetic State*, al-Muhajir tried to balance the need to generate revenue from operations in Iraq with the imperative not to devolve into rank criminality:

> Every Islamic country in history was established through its war chest of booty and prize. The sheik of Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah, God bless his soul, said: "The sultan's treasury in the book are three: booty, charity, and loot taken without fighting." ...So you must seek the reward from God, but always remember that you are getting the booty from the infidels and apostates to feed the families of the prisoners and martyrs. You take to finance another warrior who cannot loot. You gain to buy weapons to fight for the sake of God, but never go out for the sake of booty only. Be loyal. Be loyal.[37]

The ISI's efforts to increase discipline did not produce immediate improvements. Sunni militants continued to complain about the excessive violence and thievery of ISI soldiers during 2008.[38] Nonetheless, over time the ISI has been criticized less often for its excesses, either because it

has become too weak to violate the rights of Iraqis on a mass scale, time softened memories of its most egregious crimes, or surviving members were simply smart enough to avoid ideological and criminal overkill.

Retreat North to Mosul

Al-Qaeda and the ISI gained prominence in Iraq by exploiting sectarian tension between Sunni and Shi'a, but that framework became less useful as 2007 wore on, especially in largely homogenous Anbar Province, where Sunni groups were doing the most damage against the ISI. Moreover, in the contest between Sunni and Shi'a, the Shi'a were winning.[39] As a result, the ISI looked for other social grievances to prey on. It found them in Nineveh Province, north of Anbar, and home to the mixed Arab and Kurdish city of Mosul.[40]

Mosul is Iraq's second-largest city, straddling the upper reaches of the Tigris River on the edge of Iraq's Arab heartland. Although the city was historically Kurdish, it was not included in the Kurdish-governed areas during Saddam Hussein's rule, and by 2008 its population was 60 percent Arab. However, the majority of security forces in the city were Kurdish.[41] Mosul was attractive to the ISI for several reasons besides the tension between Arabs and Kurds. First, Mosul had long been a logistics hub for the ISI.[42] The primary route for foreign fighters, including the bulk of the ISI's suicide bombers, ran through Mosul, which made for very long and vulnerable logistics networks inside Iraq.[43] A retreat to Mosul shortened those lines. Second, Mosul did not receive an influx of U.S. troops during the "surge" of troops into Baghdad.[44] Third, Mosul had a small but relatively prominent Christian population, which the ISI could scapegoat and target to satisfy its core supporters without alienating the bulk of the population.[45]

The ISI's targeting of Christians was a prominent part of its campaign in Mosul, a precursor to similar attacks in Baghdad and subsuquent rhetorical attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt. In an operational sense, the campaign

against Christians was designed to drive them out of Mosul (many fled to Baghdad or left Iraq entirely), but the strategic purpose of the campaign may have been to target symbols of "Crusader-Zionism" at a time when the ISI had little ability to confront the U.S. directly.

The ISI thus reoriented itself to exacerbate the social tensions in Mosul, including by bringing suicide bombers from Baghdad to the fight in the north.[46] In a prescient statement, the U.S. spokesman in Iraq, Maj. Gen. John Perkins, explained the ISI's maneuver in early 2009: "For [al-Qaeda] to win, they have to take Baghdad. To survive, they have to hold on to Mosul."[47] The ISI have never taken Baghdad, and are unlikely to do so, but they have held enough of Mosul to survive.

Additionally, although al-Baghdadi and al-Muhajir were the ISI's most important leaders, one of the key commanders on the ground in Mosul in 2007 was a Swedish citizen of Moroccan descent who went by the name Abu Qaswarah al-Maghribi.[48] As the commander in Mosul, al-Maghribi was reportedly responsible for managing the ISI's external networks and flow of foreign fighters into Iraq.[49] The Abu Qaswarah era ended in October 2008, in what could be considered the low point for the ISI. He killed himself after being surrounded by U.S. SOF, and later that month U.S. SOF killed the ISI's chief logistician in Syria, Abu Ghadiyah, in a daring cross-border raid.[50]

Defend the Idea of the Islamic State of Iraq

The ISI's global impact was a function of its brand as much as the group's actual capacity to inflict violence. After its 2007 setbacks, the ISI needed to resurrect its brand with constituencies outside Iraq. This was not an easy path, in part because many jihadis questioned the wisdom of establishing a formal political body. The Kuwaiti jihadi Hamid al-Ali questioned whether declaring the ISI was wise if the group was unable to control territory.[51] Abu Jihad al-Ansari, the founder of an Iraqi jihadi group, circulated several letters criticizing the ISI for asserting its

institutional prerogatives when militants ought to have been focused on evicting the United States.[52] The problem for the ISI was that jihadi ideologues had expectations of what an Islamic state ought to be in practice—and the ISI could not live up to them. Before establishing the ISI, al-Qaeda in Iraq focused on the effective application of violence, which jihadis everywhere could support. But after establishing the ISI, the group had to answer to jihadi scholars, strategists, and forum-goers with varying ideas about what an Islamic state actually should mean.

Defending the ISI's brand required a concerted public relations effort to convince jihadi scholars that the state was legitimate and lay supporters that it was powerful and effective. The framework for the ISI's public relations campaign was established in a book called *Informing the People About the Islamic State of Iraq,* which was released in early 2007 and remains the most detailed description by an al-Qaeda franchise of jihadi governance.[53] The book offered an expansive defense of the ISI and described mechanisms for leadership succession, the state's responsibilities to citizens, and economic policy.

Whether those arguments were persuasive to anyone is unclear, but senior al-Qaeda leaders did sign up to support the ISI in the face of its critics. In early 2007, both Abu Yahya al-Libi and Atiyah abd al-Rahman released blistering defenses of the ISI and urged other jihadi scholars to do the same. The two leaders also urged the remaining critics to keep dissension to themselves.[54] Ultimately, both Zawahiri and bin Laden offered public support as well.

The ISI's leadership resurrected the basic framework from *Informing the People* to defend the "state's" legitimacy in 2008. They lowered expectations about its strength and compared the ISI's strength favorably to the historical example of the Prophet Mohammed's nascent polity in Medina, thus concluding that the ISI was equally legitimate.[55] To bolster al-Baghdadi's credibility, he released more statements (see Figure 5), and the ISI increasingly intimated that he was from the Prophet Muhammad's

Quraysh tribe, which prophecy indicated would produce the next caliph, the leader of a transnational Islamic empire, or caliphate.[56] The ISI leaders also cultivated supporters outside Iraq via public statements: In September 2008, al-Baghdadi thanked "the honest media personalities who defend the dignities of their brothers."[57]

From the ISI's founding through the death of al-Muhajir and al-Baghdadi in early 2010, the group's media production house, *al-Furqan*, released a number of statements from the leadership, which facilitated its campaign to enhance the group's legitimacy. The ISI released 15 al-Muhajir statements between June 2006 and September 2010, two of them posthumously.[58] Twenty-two al-Baghdadi statements were released between December 2006 and his death in March 2010.[59] The statements were released with remarkable regularity, with two obvious exceptions: a four-month gap in mid 2008 that coincided with the capture of Abu Nizar, the group's information minister, and the period from July 2009 through February 2010 (which coincides with an uptick in ISI-organized violence) when al-Baghdadi did not release any statements.[60] *Al-Furqan's* ability to disseminate information was critical for the ISI because, by 2009, al-Qaeda Central's *as-Sahab* media organization had virtually abandoned discussion of Iraq.[61]
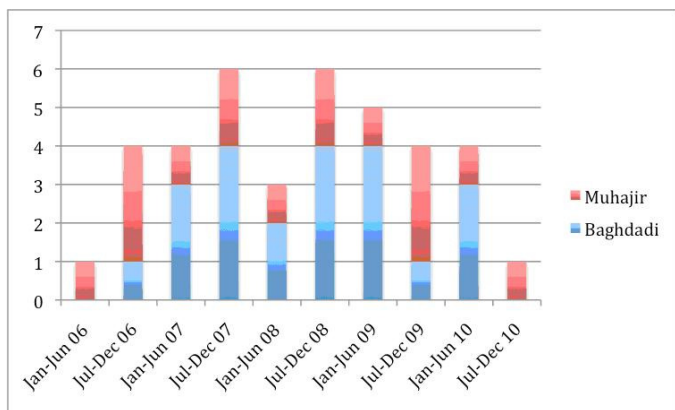
Figure 5: Communications Released by Islamic State of Iraq Leadership Figures 2006-2010

Return to the Iraqi Heartland

On April 10, 2009, a Tunisian man detonated a truck bomb at the gates of U.S. Forward Operating Base Marez in Mosul. Five U.S. soldiers were killed. The crater left by the bomb was 60 feet deep.[62] Attacks directed against U.S. troops had been rare in Iraq for more than a year, but the strike illustrated that the ISI's networks were regenerating—and those networks were soon to facilitate increased violence against softer targets, especially Iraqi government facilities. By mid-2009, the ISI had reestablished itself as a chief source of instability in Iraq and was successfully conducting major terrorist attacks in the heart of Baghdad.[63] After two and half years of operational defeats, withdrawal from Iraq's heartland, and a major battering on the world stage, the ISI was capable of offense.

The ISI's renewed role in Iraq was highlighted by a series of suicide attacks on the Ministry of Finance and other targets in August 2009 that reportedly cost $120,000 and killed 95 people.[64] The attacks were critical because they demonstrated the group's increased capability in Baghdad and because their target was the Iraqi government, which was an object of derision for many Iraqi Sunnis, including some that had previously worked against the ISI in U.S.-backed Awakening Councils. Emulating the tactics honed in Mosul, the ISI returned to Baghdad focused less on territory and confrontation with tribal groups and more on weakening government institutions.[65] The ISI kept "state" in its name and has continued to assert that it aims to establish a polity, but it has focused operationally on more traditional terrorist operations.

In April 2011, a member of the ISI's Shura council, Abu Ubaydah Abd al-Hakim al-Iraqi directly addressed the ISI's continued rhetorical focus on a polity despite the group's inability to control territory. His responded, saying, "why are these people resenting the name? What benefit do they see in taking a step back and declaring the collapse of the State of Islam in Iraq that have terrorized the alliance of the

Crusaders, foiled their plans, and held its own in the face of the most powerful forces of evil...what do these over-stringent people think the alternative should be?" Al-Iraqi then conceded the ISI's change in operational approach by rhetorically asking his critics, "Why didn't they disapprove of the name "the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan," may God the Almighty honor it and consolidate its land? Didn't the amir of the believers Mullah Muhammad Omar and the Taliban retreat to the mountains under the pressure of the crusader alliance just to be creative in fighting?!"

In November 2009, al-Muhajir explained the group's renewed focus on large-scale terrorist attacks, saying, "Developments prove that large, courageous, and targeted operations are necessary to break the bones of the infidels."[66] While not all terrorist attacks in Iraq were conducted by the ISI, Figure 6 demonstrates that al-Muhajir's focus on large-scale attacks and government ministries coincides with a renewed emergence of Baghdad as the primary location of terrorist attacks in Iraq. In October 2009 only about 20 percent of terrorist attacks in Iraq occurred in Baghdad; a year later the number was more than 40 percent and rising.
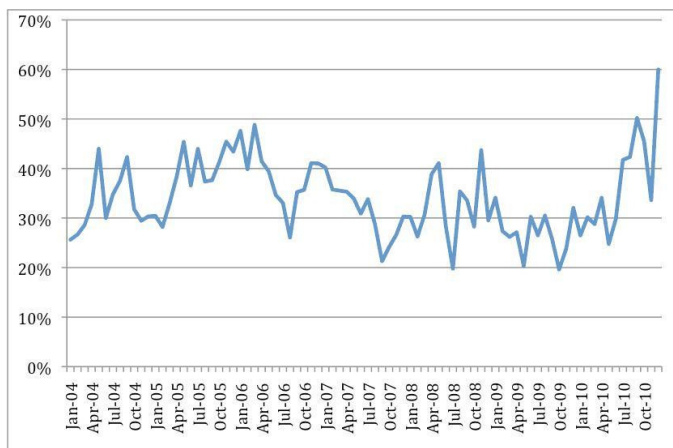
Figure 6: Percentage of Monthly Iraqi Terrorist Attacks in Baghdad 2004-2010

Exploit Iraqi Political Dysfunction and Sunni Political Weakness

The ISI's return to Baghdad coincided with an effort to improve its popular support in Iraq, and to take advantage of increasing Sunni disillusionment with the Iraqi political process. The ISI's more nuanced approach was on display in early 2010 before and after the March 7 parliamentary elections.[67] So when the Iraqi de-Baathification board banned 511 parliamentary candidates from participating in the election, it fed into the ISI's outreach efforts.

The ISI predictably condemned the elections and pledged to prevent them, but it did not launch major attacks on election day

The ISI predictably condemned the elections and pledged to prevent them, but it did not launch major attacks on election day.[68] The dearth of attacks is no doubt partly explained by the group's weakness, but al-Baghdadi's justification for the lack of violence illustrates a renewed effort to make finer distinctions about violence than it had in the past:

> ...the orders to the soldiers...were that what was wanted was to prevent Sunnis from participating in the elections, not to kill those who stubbornly go. The order was clear: Stop them, do not kill them. Despite the polytheism of the elections, and the fact that we warned the people a day before the elections...we did not deliberately kill a single Sunni."[69]

Such demonstrations of "restraint" are unlikely to produce widespread support for al-Qaeda, but the ISI's current operational strategy does not demand broad popular support, only to build support sufficient to enable irregular large-scale strikes to discredit the Iraqi government.[70] Moreover, some Sunnis did return to the insurgency during

this period, if not necessarily to the ISI.[71] The ISI's pitch was practical, not just ideological. As of July 2010, fewer than half of the 91,000 Awakening Council members had been offered jobs by the Iraqi government, and most of those were menial.[72] Meanwhile, the ISI was offering some Awakening fighters paychecks larger than the $300 per month they were receiving.[73]

The ISI's ability to attract personnel that had joined the official or semi-official security services affected its operational strategy. A series of carefully conducted prison breaks and raids on fortified government and industrial facilities suggests they had insider information.[74] The tactics used in these attacks were far more professional than earlier assaults on fortified institutions. In the March 2007 Badoush prison break, up to 300 ISI gunmen conducted a mass assault that freed more than 140 prisoners; an April 2010 prison break in Mosul relied on stolen police uniforms and carefully constructed tunnels.[75]

The ISI's tactical shifts seem to reflect an ISI decision to focus on effectiveness rather than the spiritual act of self-sacrifice in battle, and efforts the group has made to blend into Iraqi society should be seen in that light.[76] One Iraqi military officer explained that ISI members "have taken off their traditional clothes and shaved their beards. Their members now wear jeans and T-shirts filled with sentences from hip-hop songs and photos of artists, and they have shaven their heads in a way that gives the impression they can have no connection at all with religion, religiousness, or combat."[77] The ISI no longer behaves as a conquering army and has instead adopted the operational mode of a primarily terrorist organization preying on existing political turmoil to wedge itself into Iraqi society.[78]

Despite a less confrontational outreach to Iraqis, the ISI still depends on foreign fighters to serve as suicide bombers, which remain the backbone of its offensive capability.[79] According to U.S. government sources, the number of fighters entering Iraq increased to approximately 20 per month by mid 2009, a number that

was nonetheless far lower than the number of incoming fighters from 2005-07.[80] ISI statements in 2011 suggest a growing confidence in the group's ability to effectively utilize foreign fighters compared to late 2007.

According to U.S. government allegations, the fighter that bombed FOB Marez in April 2009 was one of four Tunisians who arrived in Iraq in March 2009 after leaving Tunisia on October 17, 2008.[81] The group allegedly journeyed to Iraq with the help of a wide-ranging facilitation network that included an operative in Syria, two facilitators in Iraq (in Mosul and Basra) and an Iraqi refugee in Canada named Faruq Khalil Muhammad 'Isa.[82] Interestingly, the four Tunisian fighters reportedly journeyed to Iraq via Libya, which would reflect a shift in practice from the 2007 period when North African fighters from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia primarily journeyed to Iraq through Europe.[83]

The ISI's strategic evolution increased its resilience and relevance in the post-surge Iraq, but the ISI was still far weaker than at its strongest point in late 2006. Nonetheless, the group was once again capable of conducting massive attacks in the heart of Baghdad, striking fear into Iraqis, weakening the Iraqi government, and capturing the imagination of would-be jihadis around the world.

After the First Emir: The Future of the Islamic State of Iraq

On April 18, 2010, the ISI's two top leaders, al-Baghdadi and al-Muhajir, were killed in a raid north of Baghdad.[84] Gen. Ray Odierno, the U.S. commander in Iraq, hailed the strike as "potentially the most significant blow to al-Qaeda in Iraq since the beginning of the insurgency."[85] That assessment was accurate, but because of the ISI's evolution since 2006, it was incomplete. Despite the fact that in the previous nine months, 34 of Iraq's top 42 leaders had been killed or captured, the group remained a critical threat, both in and outside Iraq.[86]

Al-Baghdadi and al-Muhajir were replaced by a leadership troika of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Qurayshi as emir, Abu Abdallah al-Qurayshi as deputy emir, and al-Nasr Lidin Allah Abu Sulayman as the minister of war.[87] Little is known about any of the ISI's new leaders. Some sources suggest that Abu Abdallah is a Moroccan with strong ties to al-Qaeda's leadership in South Asia.[88] Others indicate that that biographical information may instead apply to al-Nasr and supplement it by saying he has a knack for languages.[89] Abu Bakr and al-Nasr may have been recruited into the ISI while in custody at Camp Bucca, a U.S. detention facility in southern Iraq.[90] Their real names may be Dr. Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Samerraie and Neaman Salman Mansour al-Zaidi.[91]

Statements from the new leaders have been few and far between. Al-Nasr's first and only public statement was virulently anti-Shi'a in a way that is reminiscent of Zarqawi.[92] Abu Bakr eulogized bin Laden and pledged support for and confidence in Zawahiri, even before he was officially appointed bin Laden's successor.[93] The most extensive statement from the ISI since the troika took control came in the form of a faux interview al-Iraqi. He acknowledged the ISI's operational shifts ("...the soldiers of the Islamic state have chosen to resort to guerilla war...they now decide the form, time, and place of the confrontation...") though not the defeats that precipitated it. He also struck a conciliatory tone toward other Salafi militant networks in Iraq, such as the Islamic Army of Iraq.[94]

The ISI is not strong enough to rebuild its authority in Iraq, but it is capable of hosting terrorists planning attacks against the West. If al-Nasr really had a prior relationship with al-Qaeda central's leaders, then the ISI begins to look more like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which is led by Nasir Abd al-Karim al-Wahayshi, who worked for bin Laden before leading AQAP and has focused the group on attacking Western targets.[95] Some counterterrorism analysts argue that al-Qaeda franchises focused on global attacks are more dangerous when operating from weak states with deep connectivity to the international community.[96] If that is the case, a weakly governed Iraq may offer a better platform for al-Qaeda attacks against the West than AQAP's increasingly chaotic home in Yemen.

Terrorism Abroad: The ISI Outside Iraq

In February 2011, FBI Director Robert Mueller raised the possibility that Iraqi refugees living in the United States might be collaborating with the ISI.[97] He did not elaborate, but subsequent arrests suggest he may have been alluding to Waad Ramadan Alwan and Mohanad Shareef Hammadi, two men in Bowling Green, Kentucky, who are accused of having participated in the Iraqi insurgency and were indicted after a sting operation designed to look like a logistics cell to move money and weapons to the ISI, and Faruq Khalil Muhammad 'Isa, who allegedly facilitated the movement of the ISI foreign fighters that killed U.S. troops at FOB Marez in April 2009.[98]

The ISI—or its predecessors—have operated outside the boundaries of Iraq, including in the West, more often than is commonly understood. The group has planned strikes at least five times in Iraq's immediate vicinity:

- A planned chemical attack in Amman, Jordan, in April 2004 that was foiled by Jordanian intelligence[99] ;
- An attempted suicide attack in December 2004, on the Karamah border crossing between Iraq and Jordan that resulted in Zarqawi being sentenced in absentia to his second Jordanian death penalty[100];
- An attack (the first after Zarqawi officially joined al-Qaeda) involving seven rockets fired from the Jordanian Red Sea port of Aqaba at U.S. ships in the harbor and the neighboring Israeli town of Eilat[101];
- Zarqawi's disastrous November 2005 strike on Western-owned hotels in Amman that killed mostly Jordanians and elicited a strong backlash from the Jordanian public and al-Qaeda's leadership[102]; and
- A rocket strike in December 2005 from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.[103]

The ISI has also been linked to two attacks outside of the Middle East. The most important ISI-linked attack in the West was the June 2007 "doctors plot," in which Iraqi-born doctors fabricated crude explosives using gas canisters and attacked a London nightclub and the Glasgow airport. The phone numbers of ISI operatives were found on the perpetrators' cell phones, though the extent of the ISI's involvement in the plot is unclear.[104] An unnamed U.S. intelligence official stated that the attack should be considered "AQI related, rather than AQI directed."[105] The second ISI-linked attack in the West was a December 2010 suicide bombing attempt by Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly in Stockholm, Sweden.[106] Iraqi intelligence officials claim that al-Abdaly had visited the ISI's receiving center for foreign fighters, Mosul, and that they had warned Western forces about the prospect of an attack months beforehand.[107]

There were circumstantial indications that the ISI might have ties to the January 2011 bombing of a church in Alexandria, Egypt.[108] The attack followed explicit ISI threats against the Coptic community in Egypt and coincided with an ISI campaign against Christian targets in Baghdad. The attack was claimed by a previously unknown militant group in Iraq, though Egyptian authorities blamed jihadi networks based in the Gaza Strip.[109] In April 2011, the ISI officially denied responsibility for the attack, though it praised the perpetrators.[110]

It should go without saying that the overwhelming majority of Iraqi refugees in the United States and elsewhere have nothing to do with the ISI or militancy of any kind, despite the charges against Alwan and Hammadi. Many recent Iraqi refugees in the United States emigrated because of their cooperation with U.S. forces in Iraq and the subsequent threat to themselves and their families from the ISI or other militant groups.[111] Nonetheless, the ISI is likely to attempt to attract support from the Iraqi diaspora if its attention shifts from the domestic scene inside Iraq toward the global arena.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The ISI's original mission failed. It did not create a functioning Islamic state, and did not meet its stated goal of rallying jihadis around the globe under single unified banner. It could not even unify ideologically-similar jihadi groups in Iraq. The sectarian violence the ISI fostered has declined, though important tensions remain. The ISI is unlikely to ever again achieve the level of military capability and political authority that it enjoyed at its founding in October 2006. But the ISI has changed substantially in the last five years and now poses a different sort of challenge to the United States.

Terrorism is still extremely common in Iraq. Overall violence in Iraq has declined precipitously, but terrorism is still extremely common—even in comparison to Afghanistan and Pakistan, which have received much more media attention since 2008. Those terrorist attacks are conducted by a range of militant groups, including several active Sunni insurgent networks and at least three groups sponsored by Iran: Kataib Hizballah, Asaib al-Haq, and the Promised Day Brigades. The ISI remains active as well and is responsible for numerous major attacks; indeed, it may still be the deadliest al-Qaeda franchise in the world, responsible for hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of deaths in 2010.

ISI strategy now prioritizes terrorism rather territory. When it was formed, the ISI's institutional framework and territorial claims made it unique among al-Qaeda franchises; the group's strategic evolution has brought it much more in line with other al-Qaeda branches, which offer a frame of reference for thinking about the ISI's future. The ISI's extraordinary legacy of violence is likely to limit its attractiveness to Iraqis in the future, much as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has been hampered by the legacy of brutality established by older jihadi organizations in Algeria. The ISI is unlikely to adopt a primarily ideological role, like the al-Qaeda fighters along

the Durand Line in South Asia, because it has far more military capacity and its leadership figures are not nearly as well known or authoritative as ideologues or scholars. But al-Qaeda's manipulation of sectarian tension in Pakistan and concerted ideological infiltration of existing militant networks offers a blueprint of sorts for the ISI. Al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan tread very carefully among powerful local tribal and political players, and have endeavored to systematically promote jihadi ideas by highlighting the incompetence and depravity of the Pakistani government. In Iraq, like Pakistan, al-Qaeda efforts are facilitated by a political culture that does not disqualify political actors for violent behavior and terrorism.

The ISI's evolution increases the risk that it will attempt violent operations in the West. The ISI's strategic shift intensifies the danger that it will increase its focus on attacks abroad, including in the West. For starters, al-Qaeda Central is more likely to encourage the ISI to conduct attack abroad, in contrast to earlier periods when al-Qaeda Central urged Zarqawi to focus on attacks in Iraq. Whereas al-Qaeda Central once restrained its Iraqi affiliate over worries that the group's attacks might be so bloody as to be counterproductive, especially if focused in the Middle East, today it encourages attacks on Western targets by anyone willing to adopt its ideology. Moreover, as U.S. troops withdraw from Iraq, the U.S. is less exposed financially, politically, and militarily. If the ISI wants to directly engage in al-Qaeda's global strategy of bleeding and weakening the U.S. it will increasingly be incentivized to operate outside of Iraq. Lastly, there is no better way to resurrect a reputation in the jihadi world than striking in the West.

There are important pressures limiting the ISI's inclination to increase its operations outside of Iraq, not the least of which is institutional inertia within the group.[112] The ISI continues to pride itself on attacking Iraqi governing institutions; the more externally-focused franchise AQAP has historically attacked the Yemeni state far less often (though this is changing with the continuing chaos in Yemen), relying instead on government apathy and lack of

capacity to provide the room to plan and execute its operations abroad. Moreover, the sectarian urge to target Iraq's Shi'a-led government will continue to influence many in the ISI, and the only strategic statement released by the ISI's newest generation of leaders reinforces the group's historical emphasis on sectarianism. Fundraising will also be a key challenge.

If the ISI does emphasize attacks abroad, its operational model is likely to be different than AQAP's. The ISI does not have a compelling figure to radicalize Western recruits like Anwar al-Awlaki, who operates in collaboration with AQAP. The lack of a charismatic ideological figure will hamper ISI efforts to recruit people abroad. Instead, ISI operations are likely to evolve from more structured networks—either formulated in Iraq itself among ISI members able to travel abroad, built out of the Iraqi Diaspora, or from existing fundraising and recruitment networks that focused previously on ushering resources into Iraq.

The U.S. troop commitment to Iraq after December 2011 should be determined primarily by the need to bolster responsible Iraqi politics, not operational considerations related to the ISI. There is little reason to believe that an Iraqi state with an immature political culture and weak police forces will be able to stamp out the ISI in a still-complex militant environment. The specter of Shi'a political power and violence by Iranian-backed militants will create conditions the ISI can exploit among Sunni communities. The best reason to maintain U.S. troops in Iraq after December 2011 is to reassure endangered populations that they need not turn back to militancy in order to defend themselves in an enduringly dangerous situation. But keeping U.S. troops in Iraq also enables al-Qaeda and its allies to recruit and radicalize in that country and elsewhere. The impact of those troops on the weakening of the ISI is thus mixed—and on al-Qaeda overall it is likely negative from the United States perspective.[113] Al-Qaeda thrives off the tension created by "infidel" troops in the Middle East.

It is important, however, that the United States demonstrate a continued commitment to Iraqi political and economic progress. Unfortunately, United States diplomacy has become militarized to the point where such political commitments are now increasingly understood in terms of troop numbers. Although the excesses of the "War on Terror" have exacerbated this circumstance to the detriment of the United States' interests, maintaining a continued commitment to Iraq is critical in the medium-term, even if that requires a small number of troops. If requested by the Iraqi government, the United States should therefore maintain a minimal presence in Iraq sufficient to train Iraqi forces and demonstrate a long-term commitment to its economic and political development.

Increasingly emphasize disrupting rather than monitoring ISI support networks. A key debate among counterterrorism practitioners is whether to disrupt low-level terrorist support networks or monitor them for intelligence that leads to more important targets. In the past, emphasis on monitoring of ISI networks outside of Iraq was probably justified, but if the ISI does attempt to activate those networks for violence in the West, practitioners should increasingly emphasize disruption.

Do not stigmatize Iraqi refugee and immigrant communities. ISI networks in the West are likely to be composed of people with direct ties to Iraq. Rather than instituting selective and potentially discriminatory policies for these communities, political leaders, government officials from a range of agencies, civil society leaders, and counterterrorism practitioners should engage them directly and continually on many subjects. The goal should be to reassure and welcome a traumatized community and in doing so attract people capable of providing information about the very limited number of bad actors. Hyperbolic descriptions of the threat and intrusive surveillance are likely to be counterproductive by making the community as a whole more insular.

U.S. assessments of the ISI should use updated metrics. Changes in the ISI structure and strategy have made measuring security situation in Iraq more difficult: the overall number of attacks and measure of sectarian violence are no longer as illuminating as they once were. The ISI is no longer as active as it once was, but the group is almost certainly the most deadly al-Qaeda franchise in the world today and may be looking to increase its violence outside Iraq. Measurements of security progress in Iraq and of the ISI's strength should address not just levels of sectarian violence, but of terrorist incidents and suicide attacks. They should also focus more directly on the external networks of the ISI rather than primarily on the group's ability to project power inside Iraq.

The ISI's resilience illustrates the limits of population-centric counterinsurgency. The ISI's continued use of terrorism in Iraq reveals the limitations of U.S.-led counterinsurgency operations and raises questions about the utility of COIN in operations designed to defeat terrorist groups. The counterinsurgency strategy employed by U.S. forces weakened the ISI in 2007 and 2008, but that success came at a time when the ISI was attempting to hold territory and had overreached terribly in its relationship with Sunnis in Iraq. In the years since, however, the ISI has stabilized and terrorism in Iraq remains widespread even as other forms of violence have been virtually eliminated. Viewed as an insurgent organization, the ISI has been defeated. Viewed as a terrorist group, it is vibrant.

The persistence of the ISI in Iraq has problematic implications for the U.S. effort in Afghanistan because it suggests that even a successful outcome of the current counterinsurgency campaign may not be sufficient to prevent al-Qaeda or other international terrorist operations from utilizing Afghan territory for safe haven and planning purposes. Defeating Taliban factions in Afghanistan to the point that they no longer threaten the viability of the Afghan government is not sufficient to achieve the broader U.S. goal of preventing al-Qaeda and its allies from using Afghan territory to launch attacks against the West (a

problem obviously compounded by the fact that al-Qaeda Central? sits primarily in Pakistan). Observing the limitations of counterinsurgency is not the same as condemning the doctrine or criticizing its use in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Clearly it has value in both settings—and is a key tool in preparing the ground for an effective counterterrorism campaign. But on the specific question of squashing terrorist groups, counterinsurgency is inadequate.

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1 David S. Cloud and Ned Parker, "U.S. Willing to Leave 10,000 Troops in Iraq Past Years End, Officials Say," Los Angeles Times, July 6, 2011.

2 Data from the National Counterterrorism Center's (NCTC) Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS). At the time of this writing, September 2010 was the last month for which WITS data was available. Data for January 1, 2004-June 30, 2010, retrieved on October 27, 2010, for July 1, 2010-September 30, 2010, on January 19, 2011, and for October 1, 2010-December 31, 2010 on April 27.

3 Colin Kahl, "Breaking Dawn: Building a Long-term Strategic Partnership with Iraq," Foreign Policy, August 31, 2010.

4 WITS database.

5 Calculation based on population figures from the CIA World Factbook. Accessed January 20, 2011.

6 See, for example, Howard LaFranchi, "Obama to West Point grads: Success in Iraq progress in Afghanistan," Christian Science Monitor, May 22, 2010; Susanne Koelbl, "Iraq: Afghanistan's Model for Success," Salon, August 25, 2009.

7 For more on al-Qaeda's use of suicide bombers in Iraq, see Mohamed Hafez, Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2007); Assaf Moghadam, The Globalization of Martyrdom: al-Qaeda, Salafi-Jihad and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

8 Ambassador James Jeffrey and Gen. Lloyd Austin (Testimony Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, February 1, 2011).

9 That mistake illustrates a broader weakness within al-Qaeda's chain of command. Senior leadership, lacking reliable, up-to-date communication mechanisms are hampered in their ability to design effective strategy and then project authority across the movement. The failure of al-Qaeda's senior leadership to respond promptly to uprisings in the Arab world illustrates this failure. See, for example, Scott Shane, "As Arab Regimes Fall, al-Qaeda Sees History Fly By," New York Times, February 27, 2011; Brian Fishman, "At a Loss for Words," Foreign Policy, February 15, 2011.

10 Zarqawi's brutal campaign did not win him a mass following among Iraqis, but it was not designed to do so. Both before and after joining al-Qaeda, he relished calling himself al-Gharib, the stranger, and even used separation from society as evidence that his movement was on the correct ideological path. In doing so, Zarqawi was following in the footsteps of Islamist groups like Takfir wal Hijra, the Egyptian Islamic Group, and the Groupe Islamiques Arme, all of which believed that society needed fundamental reformation before an Islamic political hierarchy could be established. These groups differed from Ayman al-Zawahiri's first militant group, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which argued that social and political change was possible by decapitating corrupt political leaders to enable the basically good Muslim masses to assert political authority. For a broader discussion of the differences between Zarqawi and AQ central, see Fishman, "After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of al-Qaeda in Iraq," Washington Quarterly 29:4, Autumn 2006, 19–32. For more on differences between older jihadi groups, see Quintan Wictorowicz, "A Genealogy of Radical Islam," Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 28: 75-97, 2005; Wictorowicz, Islamic Activism (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2004); and David Zeidan, "Radical Islam in Egypt: A Comparison of Two Groups," Issue 3, MERIA 1999, http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1999/issue3/zeidan.pdf

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