

The Islamic State We Knew

Insights Before the Resurgence and Their Implications

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Key findings

- Because coalition forces and Iraqis routed the group once before, the group's history can inform components of a successful strategy against the Islamic State.
- The coalition against the Islamic State must degrade the group's finances.
- Any coherent plan must aim to eliminate, not merely degrade, the Islamic State's leadership and potential leadership.
- When the group is expelled from an area, an active police or troop presence needs to be established to work with the community, gain its trust, and counter the group's reemergence.
- Airpower is still an important adjunct tool against the Islamic State.
- Political accommodation with the Sunni populations of Iraq and Syria is necessary.

SUMMARY ■ The group calling itself the Islamic State poses a grave threat, not just to Iraq and Syria but to the region more broadly and to the United States, as well as its global coalition partners. A deadly and adaptive foe, the Islamic State seemed to come out of nowhere in June 2014, when it conquered Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city. However, the Islamic State of today is the direct descendant of a group that Iraq, the United States, and their partners once fought as al-Qa'ida in Iraq and then as the Islamic State of Iraq.

Drawing from articles and documents that were publicly available before 2012, this report shows that quite a bit was known about the Islamic State by the end of 2011: how it financed and organized itself, how it operated, how it captured territory, and what its relationship with airpower looked like. One big thing remained unknown, however: what it would do next. And one thing was almost beyond imagination: Not only would there be there no letup in the group's brutality once it controlled territory, there would even be an increase. The predecessor organizations of the Islamic State had been

routed before because the Sunni population of Iraq had turned against them, in part because of their ruthlessness. But they never stopped that brutality. As the Islamic State moved into Syria in late 2011 and expanded in Iraq in 2014, instead of limiting its savagery, it doubled down.

The wealth of publicly available information about the group indicates that the Islamic State's reemergence in 2014, and especially its methods and goals, should not have come as a surprise, although the strength and scope of that reemergence were rightfully shocking. Now that the Islamic State has reemerged, however, taking a second look at some of what was known could yield new insights into its weaknesses, guidance for combating it, and a warning of how difficult that will be. Doing so also suggests that even if the Islamic State is declared defeated, the United States, Iraq, and

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their allies would benefit from committing attention and analysis to the group over the longer term—the Islamic State has proved not only resilient but regenerative.

The history considered here provides information about the group's origins, finances, organization, methods of establishing control over territory, and response to airpower. The history of the Islamic State begins well before the group burst into the public consciousness, in the summer of 2014, as it swept through Mosul and other Iraqi cities. The Islamic State originated in a jihadist group founded in Jordan in the early 1990s. By 2004, one of that group's founders, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, had been operating in Iraq and aligned the group with al-Qa'ida. A series of successful military operations eliminated several rounds of group leaders, but, in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assumed command. After the June 2014 conquest of Mosul, al-Baghdadi renamed the group the Islamic State and declared himself the caliph of all Islam. During more than a decade of internal turmoil, three things have remained constant: the group's objectives, religious philosophy, and patterns when under attack.

The group's financial strategy hinged on raising money locally rather than focusing on donations—a decision that helped protect the group's autonomy from state and other sponsors that could try to steer it in the “wrong” direction. Throughout the second half of the 2000s, the group's

main sources of revenue included oil smuggling, sales of stolen goods, extortion, and other criminal activities. The group also exhibited sophisticated financial management practices and developed a system for reallocating money among different units.

Behind this sophisticated financial operation was a similarly sophisticated organization. The group was (and is) bureaucratic and hierarchical. Lower-level units reported to upper-level units, and units shared a basic structure in which upper-level emirs were responsible for security, sharia, military, and administration in a particular geographic area. These emirs worked with departments or committees and managed a layer of sector emirs and specialized emirs at lower levels. This structure created a bench of personnel knowledgeable about managing a terrorist group that intended to become a state.

The group's approach to establishing control of cities and other areas began with infiltration and ended in conquest. Time after time, place after place, the group would establish an intelligence and security apparatus, target key opponents, and establish extortion and other criminal revenue-raising practices; establish administrative and financial functions and lay the foundation for command and control, recruiting, and logistics; establish a sharia network, building relations with local religious leaders; establish a media and information function; and establish military cells to conduct attacks. Clandestine campaigns of assassination and intimidation have been part of the group's playbook for more than a decade.

Airpower proved to be both an effective tool against the group and something that it feared. Airpower was used to target group leaders, employed in combined arms operations, and instrumental in getting U.S. personnel to specific areas to conduct operations against specific targets. Indeed, airpower was so important to the fight against the group that, in 2011, as U.S. forces were planning for their final pullout, analysts noted that Iraqi security forces might not be able to maintain pressure on the group. Sure enough, as U.S. forces pulled out, gaps appeared: a lack of intelligence support, along with Iraq's minimal aviation capabilities. These included limited

transport options, limited ground attack options, and no high-end tactical flying capabilities for special operations.

The Islamic State of today is a direct descendant of its predecessors but with the expansive declaration of a global caliphate; a considerably greater scale of territory and personnel; and growth in areas outside Iraq and Syria, including Libya, Egypt, and even Afghanistan. Any solution today must involve the group's presence in both Iraq and Syria: During the Iraq war, following the U.S. and coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, Syria provided sanctuary for the group, and it was in Syria more recently that the group gathered strength before conquering Mosul. Although a strategy against the group will need to draw on newly learned information, we already know a great deal about the group: Much of what we knew by 2011 about the group's finances, organization, methods of establishing control over territory, and response to airpower has remained similar. Because coalition forces and Iraqis routed the group once before, the group's history can inform four components of a successful strategy against the Islamic State: degrading the group's finances, eliminating its leadership and potential leadership, creating a better strategy to hold territory recaptured from the group, and making use of airpower.

History can also provide warning indicators. The group has thrived where there are deep social cleavages and ineffective government presence. But, just as important, the group has created ineffective government presence through assassination campaigns. Observing a

pattern of intimidation and assassinations against established government authorities can provide a first indicator of trouble.

In terms of a strategy against the group, first, the coalition against the Islamic State must degrade the group's finances. Doing so will not end the group's activities, but finances are important because they allow the group to conduct attacks, sustain itself, and provide the trappings of legitimate governance, enabling the Islamic State to paint itself as an alternative and protector for populations that might be opposed to or disaffected from the established government or other alternatives. Today, as before, the group raises money locally through oil smuggling, sales of stolen goods, and other criminal activities. Local fundraising efforts will be hard to stop. However, the coalition can continue targeting vulnerable components of the oil-smuggling process, such as the physical distribution process, and it can also broaden the fight against both oil and antiquities smuggling by attempting to identify the intermediaries and end-purchasers and either target them or sanction them and their financial institutions.

Second, any coherent plan against the Islamic State must aim to eliminate, not merely degrade, its leadership and potential leadership. The coalition has successfully targeted numerous senior leaders, but the organization's focus on creating a deep bench of personnel means that attacking individual leaders will not destroy the group. Replacements will rise, and any damaging effect will be

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temporary. So, to be successful, the coalition must do more than take out key leaders: It must eliminate entire layers of high-level managers, such as an administrative emir and his administrative committee. The capture of the group's computers, memory sticks, and other records would multiply these effects because they would provide valuable information about group personnel, organization, and activities. However, capturing such information would likely require increased U.S. involvement in combat situations.

Third, a better hold strategy once the Islamic state is pushed out of an area is essential. Ending the ability of the Islamic State to operate openly in an area does not mean victory—it simply means that the nature of the fight has changed. The group has consistently followed a strategy of infiltration, assassination, and intimidation before fully controlling an area. It has successfully maintained underground networks in areas that had been liberated. This means that after the Islamic State is thought to be expelled from a town, the trust of the community must be gained so that intelligence can be collected. There is no doubt that military action on the ground by competent troops

is necessary to defeat the group. But after such a defeat, an active police or troop presence needs to be established to work with the community and counter the group's reemergence.

Fourth, airpower is still an important adjunct tool against the Islamic State. The predecessors of the Islamic State feared U.S. airpower and made efforts to adapt to it. The present Islamic State is no different, and airpower has been essential to stopping the group's advances and targeting leaders. However, some question whether airpower is being used as effectively or aggressively as it might be, and there are ways to escalate its use if political leaders so desire.

Finally, the record of the past shows that to defeat the Islamic State, political accommodation with the Sunni populations of Iraq and, now, Syria is necessary. Many Sunnis support the group either because of intimidation or because they view it as their only protection against other groups. Although this will be difficult, Iraq, at least, can start by ensuring fair treatment of the population when towns are recovered and by speeding the reconstruction of those towns.

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INTRODUCTION

The group now calling itself the Islamic State burst into the public consciousness in the summer of 2014, when it swept through Mosul and other Iraqi cities, quickly wresting control from Iraqi security forces and accelerating a campaign of brutality and ethnic cleansing. To many, this group—then known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS or ISIL)—seemed to come out of nowhere. Indeed, the *New York Times* provided its readers with a June 2014 background video about the group, under the headline “Meet ISIS: Behind the Islamic Militant Group That’s Overrunning Iraq.”¹

But the Islamic State of today is the direct descendant of a group the United States, Iraq, and their partners once fought as al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI) and then as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). By the end of 2011, when the organization was first setting up a wing in Syria, analysts and specialists had already spent years studying the group and actually knew quite a bit about it: how it financed and organized itself, how it established control, how it responded to airpower, and what its ultimate goals were.²

There were several things, however, that analysts and specialists did not know about the group. They did not know whether the Islamic State would decide to emphasize attacking the United States.³ They did not know whether other insurgent and terrorist groups, such as Ansar al-Islam and Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia, would eclipse the Islamic State.⁴ They did not know whether the group would shift away from insurgency and the goal of establishing an Islamic state in favor of terrorism.⁵ They did not know whether the group would become less ideological and more pragmatic.⁶ And they did not anticipate the group’s decision not only to continue its brutality once it controlled territory but even to embrace new levels of brutality. The predecessor organizations of the Islamic State had suffered defeats because the Sunni population of Iraq had turned against them, in part because of their savagery. It was reasonable to expect that the Islamic State would want to avoid another Sunni Awakening.⁷ But instead of limiting its brutality, the Islamic State doubled down.

There was one other thing that analysts and specialists did know: The United States, Iraq, and their Middle Eastern and global coalition partners were not finished with the Islamic State, and the Islamic State was not finished with them. The group was exercising influence over the local population in Mosul. Its security and media operations in that city were

robust and growing increasingly sophisticated.⁸ It was fully capable of conducting lethal attacks.⁹ Sunni exclusion in Iraq, real or perceived, had the potential to create space for the Islamic State to renew and expand its operations.¹⁰ In May 2011, three analysts noted that “the group’s structure and ability to generate local funding and recruits may keep it an effective force long after U.S. troops have left.”¹¹ By the end of 2011, that threat had not disappeared. How to mitigate it remained the quandary.

This report describes what publicly available information helped us know about the Islamic State by the end of 2011, drawing on the published work of analysts and researchers who followed the group and on the group’s own documents released by the U.S. government and by research organizations. The report concentrates on the group’s activities in Iraq for two reasons. First, as discussed below, that is mostly where the group operated until late 2011, and so most of the sources focus on Iraq. Second, Iraq is where the group gained most of its experience and honed its methods, and where much of its leadership either originated or operated before it became ISIS. When it became ISIS, there was already a great deal of information about it. Unfortunately, this considerable knowledge did not lead to understanding—understanding that might have illuminated some of the unknowns and that now must inform coalition efforts to defeat the Islamic State. The group’s reemergence should not have come as a surprise, although the specific form of that reemergence had been uncertain. Now that the Islamic State has reemerged, however, countering it can rely, in part, on the great deal of accumulated knowledge available.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

The Islamic State’s history began well before it conquered Mosul in 2014—indeed more than two decades before. In the darkest days of Operation Iraqi Freedom, one particularly violent terrorist stood out: Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, the “Sheikh of the Slaughterers.”¹² By 2005, al-Zarqawi—a militant Islamist born in Jordan—already had an impressive résumé. Among other “accomplishments,” al-Zarqawi had helped found a jihadist group in his home country in the early 1990s.¹³ By 2002, he was operating in Iraq, and, by 2003, he was leading a group called Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad.¹⁴ In 2004, he aligned his group with al-Qa’ida.¹⁵ With this alignment, he changed the

group's name to the Base of Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers, better known as al-Qa'ida in Iraq.

Starting at this time, AQI built a sophisticated propaganda campaign, transmitting text, pictures, and videos suitable for online streaming and slickly produced, capturing attacks from multiple angles.¹⁶ Although focused on Iraq, the group had activities beyond. For example, in August 2005, AQI fired rockets at two U.S. warships in the port of Aqaba, Jordan. Three months later, it carried out simultaneous suicide bombings at three U.S.-branded hotels in Amman.¹⁷ Al-Zarqawi also had a network in Europe that had been active since at least 2002 and not only was inspiring, if not planning, attacks in Europe but was also attracting Europeans to travel to Iraq to carry out suicide attacks.¹⁸

A coalition operation killed al-Zarqawi in June 2006, but two new leaders swiftly replaced him. The flow of foreign fighters continued, with at least 700 entering Iraq through Syria from August 2006 to August 2007, of which 237 came from Saudi Arabia, 111 from Libya, and more than 40 each from Syria, Yemen, and Algeria.¹⁹ In October 2006, the organization declared itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI),²⁰ with Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi serving as emir and Abu Ayyub al-Masri serving as minister of war. This declaration was far from just a local attempt to garner support. In a 2005 letter to al-Zarqawi, Ayman al-Zawahiri, then number two of the core al-Qa'ida (and after the death of Usama Bin Ladin, the leader), said that the goal of the jihadists in Iraq should not be just to expel the Americans but to establish an Islamic state.²¹ In a 95-minute video released in 2007, he defended ISI and said that it was the

vanguard for establishing a caliphate that would bring Islamic rule to the broader region.²² Furthermore, a letter dated March 6, 2008, from al-Zawahiri to Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi, communicated advice from Bin Ladin about how to improve ISI.²³

ISI came under severe military pressure around the time it was declared, and a U.S.-led operation killed both al-Baghdadi and al-Masri in 2010.²⁴ But, once again, another leader emerged: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a veteran not only of ISI but also of one of the prisons maintained by U.S. forces in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

As the civil war in Syria escalated in 2011, al-Baghdadi established a new group there, declining to claim any affiliation between the two groups. But infighting between the Iraqi and Syrian groups arose, and, in 2013, al-Baghdadi established an overt presence in Syria and changed his group's name to ISIS: the Islamic State of Iraq *and al-Sham*, or greater Syria.²⁵

In early 2014, al-Qa'ida formally disavowed all connections with ISIS. After the June 2014 conquest of Mosul, al-Baghdadi renamed the group the Islamic State and declared himself the caliph of all Islam (Figure 1).

LINKS BETWEEN YESTERDAY AND TODAY

In spite of the group's long history and leadership turnover, three things have remained constant: its objective, its religious philosophy, and its patterns when under attack. From its earliest days, the group's goal was the establishment of an Islamic

Figure 1. The Evolution of the Islamic State



SOURCES: Images from videos disseminated by al-Qa'ida in Iraq (al-Zarqawi) and ISIS (al-Baghdadi).

state organized under sharia.²⁶ As early as 2004, media reports cited al-Zarqawi as saying his goal was to expel the Americans from Iraq to establish an Islamic government, and then to “liberate” neighboring countries.²⁷ In March 2005, the group voiced the objective of reestablishing the “rightly” guided caliphate.²⁸ And, in 2008, near the second anniversary of the founding of ISI, the group’s top officials compared their state to that of Muhammad in Medina, justifying its looting and coercion in this context and proclaiming that ISI was the seed of great things to come. They also noted that Iraq would be a stepping-stone for Jerusalem.²⁹

The group’s top officials took the vision of the establishment of an Islamic state very seriously. In October 2006, when AQI declared a swath of western Iraq an “independent Islamic State of Iraq,” the group released a document explaining the state to the people and outlined the state’s responsibilities, which mainly included running judicial processes, resolving disputes, collecting required charity (*zakat*), freeing prisoners, and supporting the families of group members who had been killed.³⁰

The group also viewed violent jihad as an ethical duty and adopted a special focus on killing Shia.³¹ In a letter to Bin Ladin, intercepted in January 2004 and made public in February 2004, al-Zarqawi argued for dragging the Shia into a sectarian war, characterizing them as “the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom.”³² Al-Zarqawi was the mastermind behind the attack on the Shia al-Askari Shrine in Samarra in February 2006, which sparked enormous sectarian violence. In September 2008, Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi reiterated that jihad is necessary and that killing one apostate (the group’s term for the Shia) was worth more than killing 100 crusaders (its term for U.S. troops).³³

Starting with the Sunni Awakening in 2006, the adoption of a new U.S. counterinsurgency strategy, an increase in troops

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(known as “the surge”) under General David Petraeus in early 2007, and a sophisticated and deadly network analysis and targeting effort, ISI came under severe pressure and was facing military defeat. With many of its operatives killed in or cleared out of Anbar and Diyala provinces and Baghdad, the group retreated to Mosul and the desert area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.³⁴ Consider the pattern of security incidents from January 2007 to January 2008 in four provinces, including Ninewa, where Mosul is located (Table 1). Security incidents throughout the group’s areas of activity declined, except in one province: Ninewa. In February 2008, the number of incidents in Ninewa rose again to 747, an increase of 61 percent from January 2007.

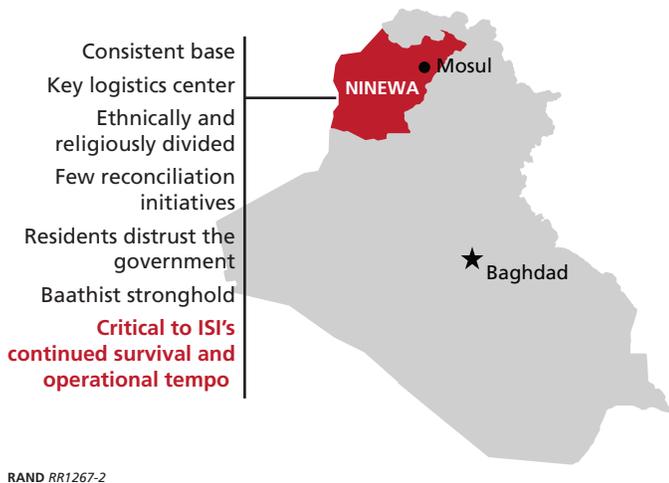
Mosul consistently served as a base for the *takfiri* and Salafi-jihadi resistance that constituted ISI.³⁵ Ninewa was a key logistics center for the foreign fighters entering Iraq to join ISI (Figure 2).³⁶ The province was ethnically and religiously divided, making the “Sunni awakening” of the type that beat

Table 1. Security Incidents in Four Provinces in Iraq, January 2007 and January 2008

Province	January 2007	January 2008	Percent Change
Anbar	976	158	-84
Babil	544	180	-67
Baghdad	1,259	425	-66
Ninewa	463	685	+48

SOURCE: Knights, 2008a.

Figure 2. Ninewa’s Importance to ISI



ISI back elsewhere in Iraq less likely.³⁷ Furthermore, Ninewa had been the focus of few government reconciliation initiatives, and many residents deeply distrusted the central government.³⁸ The province had also been a Baathist stronghold, and, by 2010, the line dividing ISI and Baathist groups in Ninewa had become thin, at best.³⁹ This stronghold was important to ISI's continued survival and operational tempo. For example Abu Qaswarah, the emir of northern Iraq until October 2008, is widely credited with maintaining the strength of the group while it was under attack elsewhere.⁴⁰ Even in early 2009, a U.S. military spokesman noted that, to win, ISI would have to take Baghdad—but to survive, it would have to hold on to Mosul.⁴¹

FINANCES

As noted earlier, analysts and specialists had, by the end of 2011, come to know quite a bit about the group now known as the Islamic State: how it financed and organized itself, how

it established control, and how it responded to airpower. This section examines the group's finances between approximately 2005 and 2008, when the group was operating primarily under the name ISI.

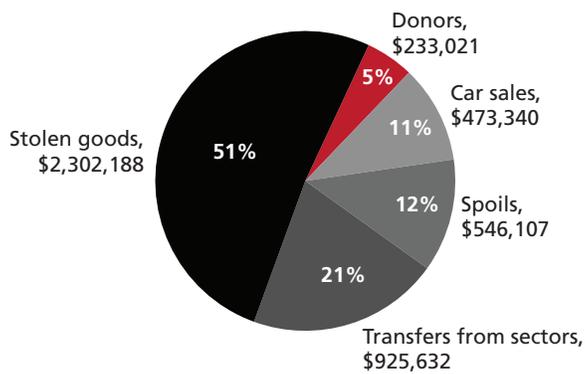
ISI's financial strategy was to raise money locally rather than focusing on donations. Between June 2005 and May 2006, for example, records show that only 5 percent of the group's Anbar revenue came from donors (Figure 3).⁴² After that period, between June and November 2006, donations constituted even less of ISI's Anbar revenue—under 3 percent.⁴³ This finding contradicts the persistent misperception that wealthy Persian Gulf donors were important funders of the group. For example, a 2006 U.S. Department of State report on terrorism put donors in the Middle East and Europe at the top of a list of AQI's possible financial resources.⁴⁴ In 2011, a report noted that al-Zarqawi's pledge of allegiance to al-Qa'ida helped attract money from international donors.⁴⁵ More recently, in March 2014, Nouri al-Maliki, then prime minister of Iraq, accused Saudi Arabians and Qataris of funding Sunni insurgents in Anbar province.⁴⁶

There were several main sources of the group's revenue throughout the second half of the 2000s:

- **Oil smuggling.** Oil for smuggling was obtained in a variety of ways. The group tapped pipelines, hijacked or diverted tanker trucks,⁴⁷ and even set up fake gas stations to gain rights to fuel shipments.⁴⁸ ISI also grappled for control of the Baiji oil refinery—Iraq's largest—which was a hotly contested asset. In 2006, an estimated one-third of the oil processed at the Baiji refinery was lost to smuggling. By mid-2007, about 70 percent of the refinery's output was being diverted to the black market.⁴⁹ In early 2007, it was reported that ISI had earned more than \$1 billion by smuggling oil from the Baiji refinery.⁵⁰
- **Sales of stolen goods.** ISI stole and then sold a variety of items, including cars and a truckload of pajamas,⁵¹ and possibly even construction equipment, generators, and elec-

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Figure 3. Anbar Province Revenue, June 2005–May 2006



SOURCE: Bahney et al., 2010, p. 37.

NOTE: At this time, AQI had divided Anbar province into six sectors. Sector leadership conducted its own fundraising and sent a portion to provincial headquarters.

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trical cables.⁵² One of ISI's biggest thefts involved stealing 26 real estate ledgers with titles for \$90 million worth of property, which the group subsequently resold.⁵³

- **Extortion.** The group's extortion practices included taking up to 20 percent of the value of contracts from large businesses in Mosul,⁵⁴ such as a soft-drink plant and cement manufacturers.⁵⁵ ISI also demanded payments from mobile-phone companies in return for not destroying cell towers. At one point, that practice alone brought in \$200,000 per month from a single mobile-phone company.⁵⁶
- **Other criminal activities.** The group's other illegal activities included cigarette smuggling, collecting a fee of \$500 per truck for passage on roadways, kidnap for ransom,⁵⁷ and stealing from Shia.

This final point—stealing from Shia—was not only a source of revenue but also both a fundamental part of the group's activities and consistent with its overall religious philosophy. In 2008, al-Masri released a statement on the proper use of booty taken from “infidels and apostates [Shia].”⁵⁸ In a November 2007 document, the group reported the execution of a Shia from Samarra who worked for the Samarra Emergency Police: “We have taken a BMW and other things from him,” the report reads. “We thank God of all creations.”⁵⁹

This emphasis on raising money locally was designed to protect ISI's autonomy, and this decision set the group apart from al-Qa'ida and other terrorist organizations, which rely on foreign donors. When ISI was on the defensive in 2007 and

2008, one of the group's strategists counseled against seeking money from foreign state sponsors, since those sponsors could ultimately end up controlling the group. He also criticized those who ignored the principle of self-sufficiency, viewing that as a symptom of bad financial management.⁶⁰

The group exhibited sophisticated financial management practices and developed a system for reallocating money among different units. During much of 2005 and early 2006, AQI had subdivided Anbar province into six sectors. As Figure 3 shows, 21 percent of AQI's Anbar revenue from June 2005 to May 2006 consisted of money raised by the different sectors within the province.⁶¹ Money flowed the other way too: The Anbar administrator transferred money to the sectors, as well as to Mosul, the border sections, and Basra.⁶² In 2005, al-Qa'ida's number two, al-Zawahiri, even asked al-Zarqawi to transfer \$100,000 to al-Qa'ida headquarters, although whether that transfer was made is unclear.⁶³

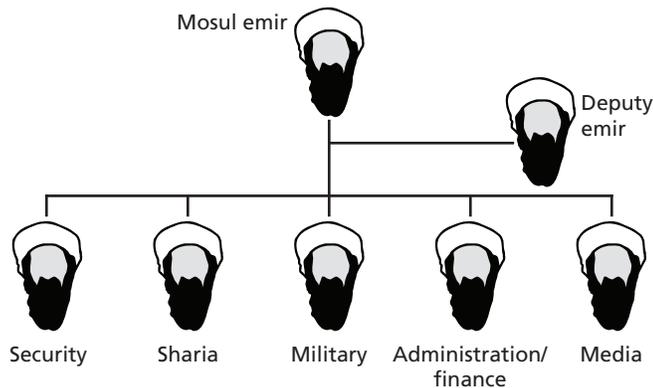
ORGANIZATION

Behind this sophisticated financial operation was a similarly sophisticated organization. ISI was—and is—bureaucratic and hierarchical. Lower-level units reported to upper-level units, and units shared a basic structure.⁶⁴ One ISI strategist credited this method of organization to what he called the “first generation” of jihadist leaders in Iraq—the group led by al-Zarqawi before he swore fealty to al-Qa'ida. Specifically, this generation established a bureaucracy based on four pillars: security, sharia, military, and administration.⁶⁵

In Mosul in 2009, ISI had an overall provincial emir and a deputy emir, and then emirs for each of the four pillars: security, sharia, military, and administration (Figure 4). The structure also introduced a fifth pillar, in the form of the media emir.⁶⁶ Although media was not among the original pillars, it played an important role throughout the life of the group, spreading the group's message and inspiring people to join. Because media was so important to ISI, the coalition heavily targeted media emirs during Operational Iraqi Freedom, between late 2007 and early 2008.⁶⁷

Under these upper-level emirs were emirs for different sectors within Mosul. Figure 5 repeats the structure in Figure 4 but shows five sector emirs reporting to the military emir, each with a specific geographic or special focus.⁶⁸ Other geographic subdivisions had similar structures. For example, in 2005–2006, Anbar province had an overall emir and specialized

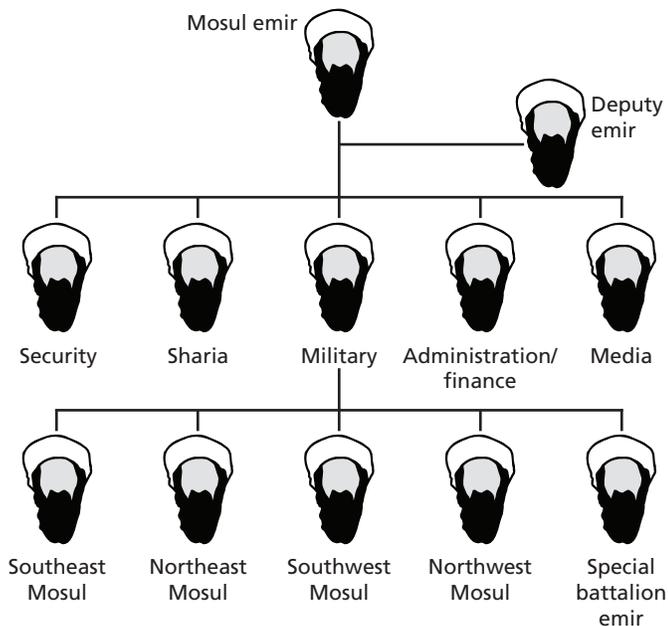
Figure 4. The Upper-Level ISI Organization in Mosul, 2009



SOURCE: Ryan, 2009.

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Figure 5. The Upper- and Lower-Level ISI Organization in Mosul, 2009



SOURCE: Ryan, 2009.

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emirs at the provincial level, and then sector emirs and specialized emirs at lower levels.⁶⁹ The emirs worked with departments or committees—a structure that created a bench of personnel knowledgeable about managing a terrorist group that intended to become a state.⁷⁰

During the group's weakest days, emirs proliferated. For example, in a sector of Anbar that encompassed a portion of the Euphrates River, there was an emir of boats.⁷¹ Elsewhere, there were emirs of gas, mortars, booby traps, tents, and the kitchen.⁷² This proliferation of emirs proved to be a problem,

causing members to lose respect for ISI leadership.⁷³ However, even though the organization suffered from the same bureaucratization as many legitimate organizations, many emirs were not just emirs on paper. Rather, they fulfilled important functions within the organization. For example, before he was killed by coalition forces on February 27, 2008, Abu Yasir al-Saudi, also known as Jar Allah, served as the military emir for the southeastern section of Mosul. In that position, he ran a network that conducted a complex attack on coalition forces in January 2008, killing five; constructed large vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices; and was involved in smuggling, kidnapping, and bringing in foreign fighters.⁷⁴

ESTABLISHING CONTROL

The five fundamental pillars of the ISI organization—security, sharia, military, administration, and media—were essential to the group's operations, as becomes evident as one learns how ISI went about establishing control over an area. An ISI strategist, writing in late 2007 or 2008, laid out a plan for retaking the city of Husaybah in Anbar province, which provides insight into this process.⁷⁵

First, ISI would rent houses in the area in question and move experienced members and their families into those houses. Group members would begin surveillance and attempt to create a network of residents who would host other members. Then security personnel would move in to conduct an assassination campaign against “the heads of apostasy,” which probably refers to government officials. After the assassination campaign, the plan called for “shelling” the city, perhaps referring to actual shelling or to a bombing campaign, such as through vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices. Direct conquest was to follow.⁷⁶

This plan was not simply notional. Time after time, place after place, ISI would

- establish an intelligence and security apparatus, target key opponents, and establish extortion and other criminal revenue-raising practices
- establish administrative and finance functions and lay the foundation for command and control, recruiting, and logistics
- establish a sharia network, building relations with local religious leaders
- establish a media and information function
- establish military cells to conduct attacks.⁷⁷

The five fundamental pillars of the ISI organization—security, sharia, military, administration, and media—were essential to the group’s operations.

Infiltration and assassination have been key components of ISI’s playbook since the beginning. For example, after coalition forces cleared the western Euphrates River Valley in late 2005, the group (then operating as AQI) embarked on an assassination and intimidation campaign in early 2006.⁷⁸ And as the group built up its presence in Mosul in 2007, it carried out numerous attacks against government institutions.⁷⁹

From 2008 through 2013, the group followed a similar pattern to establish control over Jurf as Sakhar in Babil province. In 2008, the group targeted leaders of the Sunni Awakening forces there and conducted only one attack against Americans, even though U.S. troops were present in the province. In summer 2010, the group continued its attacks against Sunni Awakening leaders but also stepped up attacks on Iraqi government officials and the Iraqi security forces. By 2012–2013, most of its attacks were directed against Iraqi security forces, as Sunni Awakening forces had been intimidated and neutralized. By 2013, ISI was in complete control of Jurf as Sakhar.⁸⁰

ISI AND AIR OPERATIONS

Airpower proved to be both an effective tool against ISI and something the group feared. Airpower was used to target ISI leaders, employed in combined arms operations, and instrumental in getting U.S. personnel to specific areas to conduct operations against specific targets. Precision air strikes originating from attack helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft were an essential part of the battle against ISI.⁸¹ In June 2006, for example, precision munitions used in an air strike killed al-Zarqawi in Diyala province.

Operation Commando Eagle, southwest of Baghdad in June 2007, featured a mix of helicopter-borne air assaults and Humvee-mounted movements targeting a set of houses used by ISI.⁸² A successful December 2007 U.S. operation designed to clear ISI from part of Babil province was preceded by air strikes involving close air support munitions.⁸³ Before and during the operation, army aviation and field artillery destroyed

safe houses and supported soldiers on the ground.⁸⁴ And air support—drones, in this case—was also used to track ISI operatives.⁸⁵

In late 2007 or 2008, an ISI strategist noted that U.S. troops were moving with impunity through ISI areas. He cited “airdrops”—in this context, likely operatives inserted by helicopter⁸⁶—along with ambushes and air superiority, all of which were creating fear among ISI members.⁸⁷

Airpower was so important to the fight against ISI that, in 2011, as U.S. forces were planning for their final pullout, analysts noted that Iraqi security forces might not be able to maintain pressure on ISI. At the time, the United States was the primary enabler of Iraqi operations, “providing aircraft, intelligence, refined targeting, and medevac,” according to Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Buchanan, a spokesman for U.S. forces in Iraq in 2011.⁸⁸

As U.S. forces pulled out, gaps appeared: a lack of intelligence support, along with Iraq’s “underdeveloped” aviation capabilities. These included limited transport options and limited ground attack options. Iraq had no high-end tactical flying capabilities for special operations.⁸⁹

Evidence suggests that ISI did think about how to defend against air superiority. In describing how to conquer an enemy emplacement, an ISI strategist noted that ISI’s air defense group should set up under foliage to protect itself as it ambushed enemy air cover.⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

In spite of the Sunni Awakening movement in 2006, the U.S. troop surge in 2007, and a campaign of highly refined U.S. and Iraqi counterterrorism operations that badly damaged ISI, the group was strong enough to persist. By 2009, it was regenerating, conducting a series of suicide attacks.⁹¹ In 2010, more people were still being killed in terrorist incidents in Iraq than in Afghanistan or Pakistan (Table 2), although not all of these attacks were perpetrated by ISI.⁹²

Table 2. People Killed by Terrorist Attacks, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan

Year	Iraq	Afghanistan	Pakistan
2008	5,013	1,997	2,293
2009	3,654	2,778	2,293
2010	3,364	3,202	2,150

SOURCE: Fishman, 2011.

The Islamic State of today is a direct descendant of AQI and ISI, but with the expansive declaration of a global caliphate, a considerably greater scale of territory and personnel, and growth in areas outside of Iraq and Syria, including Libya, Egypt, and even Afghanistan. Any solution today must involve the group's presence in both Iraq and Syria: During the Iraq war, Syria provided sanctuary for the group. In 2008, then-Maj. Gen. John Kelly, commander of Multi-National Forces-West in Iraq, noted at a press briefing that "al Qaeda operatives and others operate, live pretty openly on the Syrian side. And periodically we know that they try to come across."⁹³ And it was in Syria more recently that the group gathered strength before conquering Mosul. Although a strategy against the group will need to draw on newly learned information, we already know a great deal about the group: Much of what we knew in 2011 about the group's finances, organization, methods of establishing control over territory, and response to airpower has remained similar. Because coalition forces and Iraqis routed the group once, the group's history can inform four components of a successful strategy against the Islamic State: degrading the group's finances, eliminating its leadership and potential leadership, creating a better strategy to hold territory recaptured from the group, and making use of airpower.⁹⁴

History can also provide warning indicators. The group has thrived where there are deep social cleavages and ineffective government presence. But, just as important, the group has *created* ineffective government presence through assassination campaigns.⁹⁵ Such campaigns have created the space for the group to establish networks, engage in fundraising through extortion, and create weapon shops. Observing a pattern of intimidation and assassinations against established government authorities can provide a first indicator of trouble. Information about shakedowns and extortion can also provide an indicator, but gaining that information requires the trust of the population and consequently might be hard to learn.

In terms of a strategy against the group, first, the coalition against the Islamic State must degrade the group's finances.

Doing so will not end the group's activities, but finances are important for several reasons. Group spending has been shown to be highly correlated with attacks, so less money should mean fewer attacks.⁹⁶ Also, money allows the group to buy supplies, hire specialists, and sustain its forces. Finally, money allows the group to provide the trappings of legitimate governance, enabling it to paint itself as an alternative and protector for populations that might be opposed to or disaffected from the established government or other alternatives.

Today, as before, the Islamic State raises money locally through oil smuggling, sales of stolen goods, local taxes, road-way tolls, sales of archaeological artifacts (when it is not wantonly destroying them), and extortion, even taking a cut of the money Iraq sends to its employees in Islamic State-controlled territory. As before, donations appear to constitute only a small portion of revenues.

Local fundraising means that halting financial flows will remain a challenge. Control of territory will provide a strong boost to most counterfinance efforts, because it will directly inhibit most of the Islamic State's fundraising methods. Short of territorial control, there are things the coalition can do. Although oil smuggling still brings in considerable revenue, it has been dealt a blow by the coalition's destruction of oil and gas infrastructure, such as refineries and storage sites, and the recapture of some oil fields.⁹⁷ More can be done. It is not known whether the coalition is targeting the physical distribution activities of oil and refined products. The oil must move by truck, and the loading facilities, the trucks, and even the roads that enter into oil fields could be targeted. This would degrade the Islamic State's ability to sell oil and refined products.

To broaden the fight against both oil and antiquities smuggling, the coalition will need to identify the intermediaries and end purchasers and either target them or sanction them and their financial institutions. This will be very difficult, but there are few other options.

Second, any coherent plan against the Islamic State must aim to eliminate, not merely degrade, its leadership and poten-

tial leadership. The coalition has successfully targeted numerous senior leaders.⁹⁸ But the organization's focus on creating a deep bench of personnel has meant—and continues to mean—that attacking individual leaders will not destroy the group. Replacements will rise, and any damaging effect will be temporary. So, to be successful, the coalition must do more than take out key leaders: It must eliminate entire layers of high-level managers, such as an administrative emir and his administrative committee. The capture of the group's computers, hard drives, memory sticks, and other records—as the United States did against one target in spring 2015—would multiply these effects.⁹⁹ Such collection provides valuable information not only about people in the group but also about how it is organized, how it raises money, and how it operates.¹⁰⁰ However, capturing this information would likely require increased U.S. involvement in combat situations, so policymakers must continue to evaluate the costs of such action against its benefits, as they have presumably been doing.

As with counterfinance efforts, territorial control will boost counterleadership efforts. The Islamic State's control of large swaths of land enables it to more easily train new leaders, in addition to fighters. Such efforts would be stunted were the group forced to do them surreptitiously.

Third, a better *hold* strategy once the Islamic State is pushed out of an area is essential.¹⁰¹ Ending the ability of the Islamic State to operate openly does not mean victory—it simply means that the nature of the fight has changed. Even in 2008, the organization was majority Iraqi with extensive underground support networks.¹⁰² It has consistently followed a strategy of infiltration, assassination, and intimidation before fully controlling an area.¹⁰³ The group has successfully maintained underground networks in areas that had been liberated.¹⁰⁴ This means that after the Islamic State is thought to be expelled from a town, the trust of the community must be gained so that intelligence can be collected. An active police or troop presence needs to be established. History shows that ISI could not control urban populations in the face of a strong security presence that was positioned to receive tips from the community.¹⁰⁵

The situation on the ground remains too fluid to establish whether this is occurring in recaptured towns—whether they have been recaptured by Iraqi and allied forces under Baghdad's command or by Kurdish forces in Iraq or Syria. In some cases, control has switched back and forth.¹⁰⁶ In other cases, such as that of Dhuluiya and Tikrit, in Iraq, the retaken town has been largely destroyed, with few people moving back, because of the slow pace of reconstruction.¹⁰⁷ And in the case of the liberation of Tikrit, a largely Sunni town, some members of the liberating forces composing Shia militias have been accused of looting, burning, and committing atrocities, further creating distrust among the population.¹⁰⁸

In addition, there have been indications that retaken areas have not remained secure. For example, in an area of Diyala province recaptured from the Islamic State, unknown gunmen on July 9, 2015, attacked a checkpoint staffed by personnel from the Popular Mobilization Units, largely Shia militias allied with official Iraq government forces. The attack killed three, in an action similar to standard ISI activities when it had been pushed from a more overt presence.¹⁰⁹

Fourth, airpower is still an important adjunct tool against the Islamic State. U.S. airpower has already proved valuable. It helped save Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in August 2014. It enabled military gains by the *peshmerga*, the armed forces of the Kurdistan Region.¹¹⁰ And an air-enabled raid in Syria on May 16, 2015, resulted in the death of a senior financial officer and the recovery of an enormous amount of valuable Islamic State electronic files.¹¹¹

There have been strong arguments that the United States is not matching its use of airpower to its strategic goals, instead relying on “piecemeal attacks” that historically have proven to be ineffective.¹¹² Indeed, the many ways of *how* to use airpower are clear: Bombing can be intensified; helicopters can transport U.S. troops to conduct raids on high-value targets; U.S. airpower can be used to increase the mobility of Iraqi, Kurdish, and allied anti-Islamic State troops; U.S. forward air controllers can be embedded with local ground forces to call in precision strikes in a timely manner; and the United States can

The organization's focus on creating a deep bench of personnel has meant—and continues to mean—that attacking individual leaders will not destroy the group.

The coalition against the Islamic State is still pursuing means of degrading the group's finances and organization, and local and regional military forces are now taking the fight directly to the Islamic State.

increase its air-enabled intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, among many other examples.

However, *whether* to use these various means of airpower is less clear. Iraq and coalition partners in the Middle East lack the capabilities that would maximize airpower's value. This means that any additional use of airpower would require increased U.S. involvement. Some uses of airpower require effective ground forces, which may be lacking.¹¹³ Additionally, as in earlier years, the Islamic State has proven adaptive. After intensive air strikes started in 2014, the group started moving in a more dispersed manner and took advantage of sandstorms to facilitate those movements. Therefore, the increased use of airpower will come at a cost to the United States, in both money and, potentially, lives, and that decision must be made by top political leaders.

The coalition against the Islamic State is still pursuing means of degrading the group's finances and organization, and local and regional military forces are now taking the fight directly to the Islamic State.¹¹⁴ In fact, there is no doubt that military action is necessary. The group's ideology demands and glorifies violent jihad, and it is difficult to envision any circumstances in which the group would surrender and disband or negotiate a resolution to the current conflict.

The forces now fighting the Islamic State certainly will need to be more effective to defeat the group, and they will require continued support from militaries with advanced

airpower capabilities. Regardless of whether the effectiveness of forces is increased, however, military action—even combined with efforts to degrade finances and eliminate leadership—is necessary but not sufficient. Even before ISIS reemerged in 2013, analysts in 2010 and 2011 were noting that Sunni exclusion from the Iraqi state could create “space” for extremists¹¹⁵ and that political dysfunction would benefit ISI.¹¹⁶ They also noted that conditions were evolving to the benefit of the Islamic State: Sunni-Shia tensions were growing,¹¹⁷ elements of Iraq's security forces were becoming more deeply aligned with ethno-sectarian groups rather than giving their primary loyalty to the state,¹¹⁸ and large-scale releases of detainees were returning dangerous people to society.¹¹⁹ These conditions gave the Islamic State the political space to reemerge.¹²⁰ And the group hewed closely to its historic strategy for conquest: Well before ISIS swept into Mosul in June 2014, its sleeper cells had infiltrated the city.¹²¹

Any successful effort to destroy the group will involve a political accommodation in which Sunni communities feel that they have a future in both Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State draws support (or at least grudging acceptance) from aggrieved Sunnis in both countries. Whereas not every Sunni demand must necessarily be met, some measure of political accommodation will be necessary to turn the Sunnis against the Islamic State.

This will necessarily be very different in Syria and in Iraq because of the distinct demographics of each country. In Syria, the Sunnis form a majority and are facing a brutal Assad regime in addition to a brutal Islamic State.¹²² Although Sunnis may well turn on the Islamic State if Assad is overthrown, the Islamic State is certain to fight back. Therefore, the means of accommodating Sunnis can likely be settled only after some type of central authority is established or only after either or both the Assad regime and the Islamic State are cleared from Sunni areas.¹²³

In Iraq, the Sunnis constitute a minority. In the shorter term, there are concrete steps toward accommodation that the Iraqi government can take. First, it must exercise much more forceful control over irregular forces, in particular the Shia-dominated Popular Mobilization Units, or militias, when a town is recaptured so as to avoid the looting that occurred in Tikrit. Although these units are not solely Shia, they are largely Shia and started to be formed following a call by the leading Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, for Iraqis to mobilize to fight what was then ISIS.¹²⁴ When Iraqi forces started a campaign against the Islamic State in Anbar province in March

2015, Shia militias codenamed it Operation Labaik ya Hussein (We Are at Your Service, Hussein), referring to a historic Muslim figure whom the Shia revere but the Sunnis do not. The Pentagon quickly expressed concern this could exacerbate sectarian tensions.¹²⁵ Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi just as quickly stepped in and announced that the operation would be Labaik ya Iraq (We Are at Your Service, Iraq).¹²⁶

Establishing a Sunni stabilization force for recaptured Sunni towns or establishing greater Ministry of Defense control over all fighting forces, especially the Popular Mobilization Units, are two options, although they are admittedly difficult. Speeding reconstruction is also imperative. The Iraqi government has taken small steps, with the most recent being gaining new assistance from the World Bank.¹²⁷ Although the government is under tremendous budget pressure because of the war, it has also severely mismanaged the budget, and so a reappraisal of spending priorities is also necessary and could yield further

reconstruction funds.¹²⁸ Over the longer term, simple counts of Sunnis in the cabinet will remain a poor indicator of how well the central government is accommodating the Sunnis, contrary to the views expressed by officials of some countries when the new Iraqi government was established in 2014.¹²⁹ More important will be fair treatment, as well as equal access to government jobs, contracts, and services and participation in a functioning economy.

Finally, defeating the Islamic State will require persistence. And even if it is declared defeated, Iraq, the United States, and their allies would benefit by committing attention and analysis to the group over the longer term. As RAND researchers noted in 2011, the group is built to be resilient.¹³⁰ And it is not just resilient: It has proven to be regenerative. But history also shows that military action and political accommodation can work together. It is incumbent on regional leaders—with international help—to make that possible.

Defeating the Islamic State will require persistence. And even if it is declared defeated, the United States, Iraq, and their allies would benefit by committing attention and analysis to the group over the longer term.

Notes

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¹⁴ For information on Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, see “Analysis of the State of ISI,” n.d.

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¹⁶ Brian Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: Al-Qa’ida’s Road in and out of Iraq*, Harmony Program, West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, 2008, p. 102.

¹⁷ Fishman, 2008, p. 112.

¹⁸ Anton La Guardia, “Arrests Reveal Zarqawi Network in Europe,” *Telegraph*, December 22, 2005.

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²⁰ Pascale Combelles Siegel, “Islamic State of Iraq Commemorates Its Two-Year Anniversary,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 11, October 2008.

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- ³⁴ Eric Hamilton, *The Fight for Mosul*, Backgrounder #31, Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, April 2008; Michael R. Gordon, “Pushed out of Baghdad, Insurgents Move North,” *New York Times*, December 6, 2007.
- ³⁵ Michael Knights, “Al-Qa’ida in Iraq: Lessons from the Mosul Security Operation,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 7, June 2008b. *Takfiri* refers to a person who freely judges other Muslims regarding their adherence to Islam and accuses those judged deficient as “unbelievers.” *Salafi* describes an adherent of an ideological strain in Sunni Islam that seeks to emulate, as purer than more-modern Islamic practices, the thinking and practices of Muhammad and the earliest generations of Muslims. Jihadists believe that violent struggle against non-Muslims and Muslims whom they judge as apostate is an important religious duty (Bahney et al., 2010).
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- ³⁸ Plebani, 2010.
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- ⁴⁵ M. J. Kirdar, *Al Qaeda in Iraq*, AQAM Futures Project Case Study Series, Case Study Number 1, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Security, June 2011, p. 8; Ned Parker, “Iraqi PM Maliki Says Saudi, Qatar Openly Funding Violence in Anbar,” Reuters, March 9, 2014. Even though the Maliki statement postdates our purpose of including in this section of the report only publicly available sources from before 2012, we have included it here to illustrate the persistence of this view.
- ⁴⁶ Parker, 2014.
- ⁴⁷ Phil Williams, *Criminals, Militias, and Insurgents: Organized Crime in Iraq*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, August 26, 2009; Knights, June 2008b.
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- ⁵⁴ Knights, 2008b.
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- ⁶⁴ Bahney et al., 2010.
- ⁶⁵ “Analysis of the State of ISI,” n.d.
- ⁶⁶ Ryan, 2009.
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- ⁷³ “Analysis of the State of ISI,” n.d.
- ⁷⁴ Institute for the Study of War, “Targeting the AQI Network in SE Mosul,” Washington, D.C., March 8, 2008.
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- ⁷⁸ Knights, 2008a.
- ⁷⁹ Knights, 2008b.

- ⁸⁰ Craig Whiteside, "ISIL's Small Ball Warfare: An Effective Way to Get Back into a Ballgame," *War on the Rocks*, April 29, 2015. This source is an exception to the stated goal of using documents publicly available from before 2012. Because ISI's method of operating was well-known before Whiteside published his article (as illustrated by the other sources cited), and because his reporting is based on the most comprehensive account about such operations, it is included for further illustration.
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- ⁸² American Forces Press Service, "Iraq Operations Kill, Capture Scores of Terrorists," Army.mil, June 22, 2007.
- ⁸³ Cheatwood said this involved 2,500 pounds of close air support munitions (Jon Patrick Cheatwood, "After Action Report: An Army Lieutenant's View of AQI's Operations in al-Khidr and Hanaswa," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 3, February 2008). However, a RAND colleague notes that a single U.S. fighter jet routinely carries 4,000 pounds of bombs, sometimes far more.
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- ⁸⁹ Denselow, 2011. According to Denselow, the transport options included only 22 M-171E transport helicopters, 16 less-capable Mi-17s, and 16 UH-1s upgraded to Huey II configuration. The limited ground attack options included only three AC-208 combat caravans, which were "largely untested."
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- ⁹² Fishman, 2011.
- ⁹³ John Kelly, "DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Kelly from Iraq," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, October 23, 2008.
- ⁹⁴ This section draws from literature and documents published after 2011.
- ⁹⁵ Craig Whiteside, "War, Interrupted, Part I: The Roots of the Jihadist Resurgence in Iraq," *War on the Rocks*, November 5, 2014a; Craig Whiteside, "War, Interrupted, Part II: From Prisoners to Rulers," *War on the Rocks*, November 6, 2014b.
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- ⁹⁹ Eric Schmitt, "A Raid on ISIS Yields a Trove of Intelligence," *New York Times*, June 8, 2015.
- ¹⁰⁰ Bahney et al., 2010.
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