Breaking down borders: The Islamic State's campaign to redraw the boundaries of the Levant

In the second of a two-part series, Derek Henry Flood examines the context of the Islamic State's emergence and analyses the threat it poses, not only to regional states but also to fellow militant groups.

The series of battlefield successes accomplished by the Islamic State in Syria and more recently Iraq has stunned the world. Having evolved from militant Islamist group Jamaat Tawhid wal-Jihad - and then becoming better known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) under the leadership of Ahmad Fadl Nazzal al-Khalayilah (alias Abu Musab al-Zarqawi) and then Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) - the Islamic State has seemingly emerged as the vanguard of the transnational Salafist jihadist movement. It decisively broke with, and undermined, the Al-Qaeda leadership, smashed rival militant groups, and established a strong territorial base in Syria, before then launching a major offensive across northern Iraq in June 2014 and humiliating the Iraqi government and security forces in the process.

From the eponymous capital of Syria's Al-Raqqa governorate along the Euphrates River into Iraq, the Islamic State has connected conflict corridors through Syria's Deir ez-Zour governorate to Iraq's Anbar province and from Syria's Al-Hasaka governorate all the way to Iraq's Diyala province, thereby threatening the ragged periphery of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, and reaching the vicinity of the border with Iran. The threat posed by the group was underlined by its swift capture of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2014, preceded by the capture of Fallujah and Ramadi - albeit the latter only briefly - in January, which gave an impression of the group as an all-powerful insurgent movement helmed by brilliant strategists. The group's seizure of substantial territory during the offensive prompted it to announce the re-establishment of the khilafa, or Islamic caliphate, on 29 June, underlining the scale of the Islamic State's ambitions.
Militants in the city of Fallujah in Iraq’s Anbar province celebrate the 29 June announcement by the Islamic State of the re-establishment of the khilafa (caliphate) in territory controlled by the group in Iraq and Syria. (PA)

However, the groundwork for the Islamic State's current armed campaign and territorial vision can be traced back to the pained history of Baathism in Iraq and Syria, combined with past actions of external military actors in both countries. Although Syria and Iraq both had fledgling Baathist coups in early 1963, their respective leaders' visions for the future and views on state sovereignty were markedly different. Far from being a monolithic movement, in 1966 a deep split occurred within the Syrian and Iraqi branches of the Baath Party that was never amicably resolved. The Levantine regional borders - demarcated within the then Ottoman Empire by French and UK diplomats in 1916 and known thereafter as the Sykes-Picot Agreement - were de facto reinforced by the decades of enmity between the rival Baathist wings in Damascus and Baghdad.

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The Assads

Although the rise of Baathism in Syria was synonymous with Alawite leadership, Syria's two previous presidents, Amin al-Hafez (1963-66) and Nureddin al-Atassi (1966-70), hailed from the country's overwhelming Sunni majority. Nevertheless, the real power lay with high-ranking Baathist Alawite officers such as Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad. Assad came to power following the 'Corrective Revolution' coup in November 1970, and while he briefly appointed a token Sunni Baathist, Ahmad al-Khatib, as president to present a veneer of legitimacy to his personal refurbishing of the government, this arrangement was short-lived as Assad ultimately came to rule the country without
apology. After this, the already prominent figuring of minority Alawites in power structures in Syria was seemingly irreversible.

[Continued in full version...]

The Islamic State's Syrian genesis

The border between Syria and Iraq has a substantive history of being used by Islamist militants. The cross-border networks that evolved following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 were initially used to funnel foreign nationals through Syria into Iraq to fight the United States and other coalition military forces. Despite the co-operation of Syria's intelligence and security structures with US intelligence in the early period following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US mainland, the Assad government in Damascus then proceeded to quietly allow jihadists from as far afield as Morocco and Belgium to travel unimpeded along a new ‘caravan’ route through Homs and Deir ez-Zour governorates into Iraq to fight foreign military forces.

One of the major beneficiaries of this influx of foreign nationals was Zarqawi’s AQI - Zarqawi, a Jordanian national, was a foreign fighter himself - which frequently used these people for suicide attacks. Although Zarqawi's group continued to be typically referred to as AQI over the following decade, the group itself adopted a progressive series of names that attempted to reflect its status as a Sunni jihadist umbrella organisation in the country, such as the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen fil-Iraq, or the Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq (MSC). Four months after Zarqawi's death in June 2006, the MSC was renamed the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) and it was under this name that the group operated until mid-2013.

As the anti-government insurgency in Syria, starting in mid-2011, began to evolve into a sectarian civil war between the Alawite-dominated government and the Sunni-dominated opposition, elements of the opposition became increasingly radicalised, with ever more hardline jihadist factions emerging. One of the most prominent was Jabhat al-Nusra, led by Abu Muhammad al-Golani, which emerged and became operationally active from January 2012 onwards. Over the following year, Jabhat al-Nusra developed a reputation as one of the most hardline and operationally proficient Islamist militant groups operating in Syria.

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Territorial manoeuvres

For the first two years of the conflict in Syria, much of the strategic focus of both the government and the opposition was on the northern and western borders, with Turkey and Lebanon respectively, which were used by militants to move in and out of the conflict theatre. Meanwhile, Syria’s eastern borders, where the governorates of Al-Hasakah, Deir ez-Zour, and Homs adjoin Iraq’s Ninawa and Anbar provinces, were largely considered no-go zones that were difficult to reach and not of significant strategic value. However, it is precisely this vulnerable, overlooked region that the Islamic State has successfully exploited initially in its push to link conflict theatres in Iraq and Syria, and then as part of its khilafa project.

When Islamic State militants began to move into Syria, first to form Jabhat al-Nusra and then to form ISIL, they used the same caravan routes that had been employed to move foreign fighters from Syria into Iraq a decade earlier. Within Syria, the group has established a major base of operations in the city of Al-Raqqa - the only governorate capital held by anti-government forces - and has developed a significant corridor of control southeast from the city, through Deir ez-Zour to the border with Anbar. Further north, the group has fought significant battles with the Kurdish militant group Yekineyên Parastina Gel (YPG) in areas of Al-Hasakah governorate in order to gain control of the border crossings into Ninawa.
The oil-producing desert region of eastern Syria has not only provided the Islamic State with a key base of operations in that country, but it also represents a staging ground for moving men and materiel into Iraq to bolster the group's insurgent campaign there. When IHS Jane's interviewed Iraqi security force personnel along the informal border between Iraq and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq in August 2013, subjects spoke of the impending threat they felt the Islamic State posed and said they felt they lacked the full backing and support of the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Pragmatic alliances

Although the Islamic State has made substantial inroads targeting the state and security forces in Iraq, it is a somewhat different story in Syria, where the majority of the group's operations have targeted rival militant groups. Indeed, of all the Islamic State attacks in Syria recorded by IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre (JTIC) since the beginning of 2013, more than 70% have targeted other militant groups, rather than the Syrian state or security forces.

More than anything, this is symptomatic of the Islamic State conflating the agendas of its adversaries in Syria - ranging from the Syrian state and allied paramilitaries and Hizbullah militants to a spectrum of rival anti-government militant groups, whether nationalist, Kurdish, or Sunni Islamist - and attacking whomever it deems a threat to its expansionist project at that point. The broad range of targets attacked by the Islamic State can be neatly rationalised by the group's takfirist ideology, whereby anybody not adhering to the group's hardline interpretation of Islam can be declared an apostate and attacked legitimately.

Nonetheless, despite this panoply of opponents, the leadership of the Islamic State is pragmatic enough to form alliances when it is operationally conducive to do so. For example, the group has frequently joined forces with fellow Islamist groups - such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya - in clashes against the YPG in Syria's Al-Hasakah governorate since July 2013, notably after the schism occurred between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra. Elsewhere in Syria, the Islamic State has participated in several joint offensives against Syrian security forces alongside Jabhat al-Nusra and members of the Islamist alliance Al-Jabha al-Islamiyya al-Suriyya.

Challenger to the throne

Over the past 14 months, the forming of ISIL and then its transition to the Islamic State following the announcement of the khilafa has seen the group rise beyond its historical status as just one of several regional Al-Qaeda affiliate organisations, and has undermined and threatened Al-Qaeda's widely recognised status as the vanguard and leader of the transnational jihadist movement.

There has been a history of differences between the Al-Qaeda leadership and its one-time Iraqi affiliate. In 2005, a letter from Zawahiri - then acting as deputy to now-deceased Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden - to Zarqawi criticised AQI for its sectarian targeting of Shia Muslim civilians, urging
the group to moderate its campaign. Similar rhetoric was used by Al-Qaeda in its disavowal of the Islamic State in February 2014, when it made clear that it considered the group to be too extreme in its use of violence against fellow militants.

Such differences demonstrate key fundamental distinctions in the outlooks of the two organisations. Although both adhere to transnational Salafist jihadist ideology and objectives, their operational focus differs. Al-Qaeda’s operational focus has been on the "far enemy", and the US in particular, with a view to the khilafa being restored once national governments in the Middle East are cut off from the support and assistance of such third-party actors. By contrast, the Islamic State is regional in its immediate focus, seeking to overthrow national governments in its area of operations and then announcing the establishment of the khilafa once a transnational area of control has been established.

Other militant Islamist group leaders have moved in a somewhat similar direction historically. Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar declared Afghanistan an Islamic emirate and himself 'amir ul-momineen' (commander of the faithful) in 1996, and the late Imarat Kavkaz leader Dokka Umarov created an emirate in the North Caucasus in 2007. However, the agendas of both groups were highly localised, and what distinguishes the Islamic State is the creation of a transnational entity and the announcement of Baghdadi as Khalifa (Caliph) Ibrahim, thereby demanding recognition from the umma (worldwide Muslim community) of his leadership of the Islamic world.

The declaration was accompanied by a demand that all militant Islamist groups around the world recognise the khilafa and the authority of Baghdadi and pledge their allegiance to both. It is an extremely bold gambit, and again distinguishes the group from Al-Qaeda, as it seems unthinkable in the short-to-medium term that Zawahiri would seek to claim leadership of, and impose his authority on, the international Islamic community in such a way. It could be argued, however, that this is just as much a question of status and capability as it is of ideology. The Al-Qaeda leadership has been struggling for relevancy since the so-called Arab Spring uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 and can hardly be said to be playing a salutary role as the supposed vanguard of transnational Salafist jihad. Conversely, the Islamic State is in the ascendancy, having created a roughly contiguous area of territorial control and largely inflicting chastening defeats on those it attacks. The group's propaganda and messaging is also more effective, giving it a far greater appeal to a new generation of Islamist militants worldwide. In this context, the Islamic State can perhaps be seen to have taken the torch from Al-Qaeda and represent the new vanguard of transnational Salafist jihad.
An Islamic State militant on patrol in the city of Fallujah in Iraq's Anbar province on 21 January, shortly after the city was seized by the group along with local Sunni insurgents and anti-government tribesmen. (PA)
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