

Understanding the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

PART ONE: GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT AND GENESIS OF ISIL

In Part 1 of this training, we will describe five geopolitical factors that contributed to ISIL's emergence and rise. We will then highlight research conducted on ISIL's objectives and the objectives of ISIL's followers, allowing us to more closely examine the connection between ISIL and the broader geopolitical context.

ISIL emerged from what might be called a perfect storm of fragile states combined with 21st Century social, technological, environmental, and demographic change.

Iraq and Syria are not the only states to experience such changes since the turn of the century, but the weak governments in both of these nations created a power vacuum in which non-state actors—like ISIL—could vie for legitimacy among the local populations.

This first contextual factor—failed states and ineffectual governance—is the factor that has enabled the other four factors to combine into this perfect storm. In the case of Iraq, decisions made by the U.S. led coalition to disband the Iraqi National Army led to disenfranchisement of significant numbers of Iraqi Sunnis. This problem was exacerbated by a lack of inclusive governance from the Shi'a led government in Baghdad, which was either unwilling or unable to overcome Sunni reluctance to participate in Iraq's fledgling democracy. And finally, the draw-down of U.S. troops in Iraq left the weak Iraqi government vulnerable to a surprising territorial grab by ISIL in the Summer of 2014.

The second factor is one of social change: specifically, the rapid change in the Arab world in the 21st Century, consisting of rising Islamist fundamentalism, declining nationalism, and post-Arab Spring empowerment of sub-state actors.

In the absence of effectual and legitimate governance, nationalism becomes a less compelling motivator to individuals and communities than other salient group characteristics.

Religious fundamentalism, which provides followers with clear frameworks for how individuals and societies should look and behave, has gained traction in response to the forces of globalization that seem to erode traditional values and sources of identity, as well as create winners and losers in a way that outpaces the ability of some governments to deliver prosperity and well-being. Consider the case of Islamism as a modern political ideology that seeks to fill the gap left by governments unable to provide or deliver.

Imagine experiencing 90 years of corrupt, authoritarian, or just weak governance under the various secular forms of 'Pan-Arabism,' Parliamentary systems, Military strongmen, or nominal democracies. Eventually, the vocabulary and the symbols of secular politics become corrupted. And then a new movement emerges that defines the organization of society in deeply meaningful and value-laden terminology of your faith. Where man-made law has failed you, God's sovereignty will deliver justice, pride, strength and meaning. It is not hard to imagine how attractive the symbols, vocabulary and role models based in one's faith would be when all of the alternatives have failed. But despite the salience of Islamism in the Arab world, the Arab Spring was not an Islamist uprising at its start.

Of the forces of social change that have contributed to ISIL's rise, none is perhaps as discouraging to the international community as the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

As a series of uprisings, the Arab Spring was carried out by individuals and communities dissatisfied with the status quo of their governments, who generally sought less corrupt and more representative forms of government. As governments were destabilized, however, two forces benefited the most. First, it was the most well-organized Islamist parties that tended to gain the greatest advantage, and second, the sectarian tensions held at bay by stable, if sometimes unsavory governments, were unleashed.

The Arab Spring ushered in a brutal civil war in Syrian Civil, where anti-Assad sentiment fueled regional Sunni support for rebels seeking to topple the Alawite regime, backed by Iran and defended by Hezbollah. It is this sectarian environment of resource mobilization in which the organization formerly known as al-Qa'ida in Iraq found a new lease on life, leaching off of the people,

money and weapons flowing into Syria to depose Assad. The dissolution government control in portions of Syria, and in Iraq as previously discussed, fed by regional sectarian competition, set the conditions for ISIL's resurgence. ISIL has taken advantage of this environment of sectarian competition, serving both as an organizing force in the absence of strong governance and as an agitator of regional conflicts.

The third factor contributing to ISIL's rise is the advent of the 21st Century information age. The emergence of cyber, particularly the social media applications and mobile technologies, has made the sharing of information, experiences, and beliefs across vast distances a low-cost endeavor in terms of both time and money. Whereas prior to the advent of Web 2.0 (meaning: social media, relying on user-created content) and Web 3.0 (meaning: mobile platforms for accessing and participating in online media), the infrastructure required to share information and ideologies across distances required investments of labor and capital possible only for well-funded governments or other wealthy entities, the low-cost of access to social media and mobile technologies across the globe has been a boon to non-state actors seeking to spread their influence and legitimacy, either in productive or destructive ways. Where al-Qa'ida articulated many of the ideas that underpin violent jihadism as it is currently understood, ISIL exploited the capabilities of WEB 3.0 to create a viral meme – an idea that lives on through replication – that has spread like a contagion.

The fourth factor in this perfect storm is the combined effects of drought and climate change on the economic and social stability of the Middle East. With changes in agricultural yields and the availability of natural resources presenting a massive challenge for even the most well-prepared of governments and societies, the social foment of the 21st Century Middle East is inextricably linked to broader environmental changes. Consider the case of Yemen, where a weak central government has used oil revenue to buy the loyalty of far-off tribes. As the country runs out of oil and potable water, the increased pressure brought about by the limited resources creates a problem that the government can no longer stave off via patronage, the government loses its limited degree of control, and the society fractures along sub-state fault lines: A Secessionist movement in the South, AQAP in the South and the Haudramout, the Houthis in the capital.

Lastly, the demographic changes seen in many parts of the developing world are also evident in Iraq and Syria: the so-called “youth bulge”, referring to a sharp rise in the proportion of the region's population under the age of 20, has resulted in a generation of young Syrians and Iraqis—particularly young men—forced to contend with high unemployment rates and lack of political efficacy. This demographic shift, in combination with the region's political instability and economic inequity, has created a population for whom ISIL's vision of personal and organizational purpose and fulfillment is especially attractive. In the absence of attractive alternatives, ISIL's message is particularly potent for these young men. When I look at an ISIL propaganda video of an 11-year-old boy participating in an assassination of a ‘spy,’ I may be horrified, and fail to understand how this reality can be construed as a utopia. But if I were a 25-year-old unemployed male with few prospects for meaning work, a salary, a wife – I may look at this same video and understand that in the Islamic State, an 11-year-old is more empowered to be a man, to defend his faith, to take a wife, than I am.

These five contributing trends will continue to dynamically affect the situation in the Middle East. It is likely that climate change will continue as a destabilizing force, and that demographic changes and population growth will add greater stress. Meanwhile, super-empowered groups and individuals at a sub-state level will have greater access to more empowering technology over time. There will be continued stress between the winners and losers of globalization, which in the case of ISIL and the Middle East will pit different visions of Muslim society against each other, and assist in the erosion of sovereignty and the inter-state system.

For the young men and other individuals whose exposure to this perfect storm has led them to ISIL, what drives them to join and carry out the objectives of ISIL? How can we understand the motivations of these individuals in the context of not only ISIL's stated objectives, but also the broader geopolitical context from which ISIL has emerged?

Researchers from the Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events, a DHS Center of Excellence based at the University of Southern California, took on the challenge of parsing ISIL's objectives and the motivations of its followers. Being unable to directly interview ISIL leaders and followers, the researchers built on an indirect methodology (previously used by other researchers to identify and structure the objectives of Al Qaeda) of coding and sorting open source statements made by leaders and followers of ISIL—as well as coding and sorting statements made by subject matter experts about ISIL.

The researchers found that followers and recruits of ISIL have 3 main strategic objectives:

One. Humanitarian fulfillment: These are objectives such as ‘ending the war in Syria,’ or ‘Fight oppression’ – and was often cast in a sectarian way – that Sunnis are being oppressed and should be liberated from the Shi'a.

Two: Religious fulfillment: These are objectives such as ‘Being the tool of God,’ or “fulfilling the promise of god.”

Three: Personal fulfillment. These are wide-ranging objectives from gaining a sense of individual empowerment, improving one's material situation, joining a brotherhood, or being able to take part in sanctioned violence.

Of these three factors, religious and personal fulfillment are more commonly discussed by the international community than humanitarian fulfillment. It is this drive for humanitarian fulfillment that is most obviously linked to the broader structural and systemic factors that allowed for ISIL's emergence. Several researchers observed that there may be regional differences in motivations in terms of recruits – that those foreign fighters coming from the Muslim majority countries may be motivated by different sets of factors on average– say humanitarian and sectarian concerns, vs foreign fighters from the West who may have more individual level reasons such as a desire to belong to a brotherhood or to participate in sanctioned violence. Of course- we should not overly generalize, but there may be some pragmatic value in tailoring Counternarratives in a given region to address the most salient aspects of ISIL's narratives in that region.

So what is ISIL's vision, and how do its organizational objectives connect with the objectives of its followers, within the broader context of this perfect storm?

The researchers found that ISIL pursues four strategic objectives:

One. Establish a Caliphate in Iraq and the Levant;

Two. Control and govern this Caliphate

Three: Expand Islam and Sharia law worldwide; and

Four: Recreate a specific vision of the power and glory of Sunni Islam.

Beyond these strategic objectives is ISIL's eschatological goal: ushering in al-Malahem, the final, apocalyptic battle between the Muslim world and non-Muslim world. In preparation for al-Malahem, ISIL is attempting to "purify Islam" according to their own interpretation of the religion, and is instigating internecine and sectarian conflict. This goal is a key driver behind ISIL's violence mobilization.

In Part 2, we will discuss ISIL's core capacities that allow it to pursue these objectives.

For further information on the topics and research methods described in Part 1, refer to the white papers listed here.



The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is supported in part by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through a Center of Excellence program based at the University of Maryland. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. For more information, contact START at infostart@start.umd.edu or visit www.start.umd.edu.

This research was supported by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense through awards made to the START. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense or START.