

How ISIS Controls the Occupied Areas in Iraq

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Since its occupation of Mosul in late May 2014, ISIS's¹ territorial gains raise the question of how ISIS is managing to maintain its hold on large areas and control or govern the local populations. The answers to this question may provide some insight into the degree of durability and viability of ISIS's presence in the Sunni regions of Iraq. Maintaining political and territorial control is particularly complicated during war. In the case of ISIS, a radical jihadi organization, it is even more complicated because there appears to be an inherent tension between ideology and praxis in the day to day effort to secure its territorial gains. Consequently, the organization is facing several challenges that might affect its ability to maintain control over the territory it has taken.

Very little is known about ISIS's operational planning. In Mosul, the city's conquest was preceded by a chain of suicide bomb attacks on Iraqi army checkpoints. In the mayhem, ISIS troops took control of major institutional centers, including military bases. The senior Iraqi military command in Mosul, which was already estranged from the population, was the first to flee, and it was followed by rank and file soldiers, as well as policemen and civil servants. In Mosul and other surrounding towns, ISIS's conquest was followed by the release of prisoners, many of them ISIS men, thus increasing its ranks. Exploiting the momentum, ISIS quickly drove troops to other towns and repeated the same rituals: driving convoys of cars with flags on the main road, hoisting its black flag on government buildings, storming into prisons and releasing followers, and setting up checkpoints. [As some astute observers have noted](#), this resembles a theater of control rather than real control; nevertheless, the videos of these rituals reinforce the image of a conquering power on the path to victory.

¹ The initials stand for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (Greater Syria). ISIS's name was recently shortened to IS, "Islamic State," after the proclamation of a Caliphate. In this paper I will continue using "ISIS."

ISIS has expanded its control very quickly. Along the main artery from the north, ISIS has been fighting the Iraqi army between Tikrit and Samarra, approximately 100 kilometers from Baghdad, the capital. In the west, ISIS controls most of the province of Anbar. South of Baghdad, in the province of Babylon, fighting was reported in the Sunni area referred to as “The Triangle of Death.” In the north, ISIS and the Iraqi army fight for the control of the strategic, predominantly Shi‘i-Turcoman town Tel‘Afar. The Kurds took control of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and the adjacent disputed areas. In some of those areas, Kurdish Peshmerga forces protect the indigenous minority communities: Yazidis, Christians, and Shabak (a local community, mostly Shi‘a). However, the Arab tribal area of Hawijah, in the province of Kirkuk, is controlled by ISIS. The Peshmerga have also fought ISIS for control of Jalawla and Khanaqin, towns on the eastern border with Iran. ISIS might use the sparsely populated expanses of Iraq’s western border to attack the holy shrine cities (Karbala, Najaf, and Kufa) and the other main Shi‘i population centers of the lower and middle Euphrates regions (Nasiriyah, Samawah), which are home to the majority of Iraq’s Shi‘i population.

So how substantial is ISIS’s territorial control? The picture is murky and fluid. ISIS’s control is often partial and temporary. Nevertheless, ISIS has managed to safeguard its military control over some areas in the north, primarily Mosul. Media coverage of these areas is inevitably scant and biased. However, the few independent Iraqi reporters, especially those of Niqash (www.niqash.org), a German sponsored Iraqi news site, who visited areas under ISIS control, provide an interesting picture. [Every visitor to Hawijah is given a Qur’an by ISIS men at the first checkpoint](#). It is not known whether this practice exists elsewhere. ISIS made itself visible by raising its flags and organizing ritual convoys. Government buildings and mosques were organized into departments: the military department, the department for relations with the tribes, as well as the “department of secret operations,” which collects intelligence on ISIS rivals. Mosul has been divided into zones, with each zone under the authority of an “emir.” Mosques have been turned into active Islamic courts and schools have been turned into detention centers. ISIS also changed signs and terminology: the new sign on the entrance to Mosul welcomes the visitor to “Wilayat Mosul” (a reference to the Ottoman Empire’s administrative division) substituting the former term “Muhafathat Ninawa” (Ninawa Province). Hawijah, formerly a sub-unit in Kirkuk province, was upgraded by ISIS into a “wilaya.” In both areas ISIS promised to nominate a governor (*wali*), but this has not happened thus far.²

In the ISIS-controlled areas that contain a large Arab Sunni population, ISIS has invited civil servants to return to their jobs, but most have refused the offer. The Baghdad government gave them an unlimited leave and they are obviously reluctant to jeopardize it. They are terrified by the prospect of working under ISIS. Yet without their cooperation, nothing can function in the occupied areas. The water, sewage, and electricity systems hardly work and neither do other necessary basic services. Interestingly, policemen are accepted to ISIS ranks pending a “repentance” (*tawbah*) in a mosque and a one year probation period. [In some areas, including Mosul, ISIS already faces manpower shortages.](#) Overall, ISIS faces a dilemma: it needs people to provide basic government services in the areas it controls, but its tactics of violent intimidation reduces the likelihood that people will be willing to return to their jobs under ISIS management.

Many of the Sunni insurgents in Iraq consider themselves Iraqi patriots and do not accept the elimination of Iraq’s sovereign borders. In Mosul, ISIS broke its promise to nominate one of the non-ISIS Sunni insurgents to the new council that it established. Several days after the occupation of Mosul, many people gathered in a central square to attend a speech that should have been delivered by ‘Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, a former Saddam Hussein deputy, and the most senior ex-Ba’thi still alive and at liberty. The people of Mosul were frustrated when they discovered that ISIS had prevented al-Duri from delivering a speech. In addition, ISIS destroyed a venerated Naqshbandi order Sufi shrine in Mosul, in line with its salafi worldview thus further aggravating relations with the Sunni Iraqi insurgents, [some of whom are members of “The Army of the Naqshbandi Order.”](#) Clashes between this organization and ISIS were reported in other areas, too. Iraqi Sunni politicians expect this cleavage to widen, which they believe provides hope for the ultimate liberation of the Sunni areas from ISIS control.

This raises another dilemma for ISIS: should it share power? If it refuses, it runs the risk of alienating the local population. On the other hand, if it does decide to share power with ex-Ba’this and ex-Republican Guard officers, ISIS might find itself being driven out of Iraq by its erstwhile allies.

Some of the areas under ISIS control are home to Iraq’s smaller communities: Sinjar, Tel’Afar, the Mosul Valley, Kirkuk, and Khanaqin. Upon taking Mosul, ISIS vowed to kill every non-Muslim who refused to convert and destroy their places of worship. In practice, Christians in Mosul have had to pay a poll tax (*jizya*) of \$250 per person, and the list of demolished places of worship is getting longer by the day. In some disputed areas the Kurdish Peshmerga intervened to protect minorities, but Kurds themselves are a minority in Mosul. The safety and well-being of ethnic and religious minorities is extremely sensitive and might trigger foreign (Turkish, Kurdish, or Western) intervention in order to assist and protect these minorities. While the prospect of a compromise in which ISIS promises to

protect minorities, as happened in Syria, cannot be ruled out, ISIS's zeal is ascendant at the moment, and minorities remain at risk. Furthermore, the non-Muslim poll tax arrangement may not include all of the region's minority communities: Yazidis, Shabak, as well as Arab and Turcoman Shi'a will not enjoy ISIS's protection.

[It has been suggested that ISIS was able to successfully establish a functional government in Syria's al-Raqqa province.](#) This included distributing commodities, such as cooking gas and food. Although the degree of ISIS's actual governance and control in that area is unknown, the major difference between the Syrian province of al-Raqqa and the Iraqi provinces (Ninawa, Salah al-Din, and Anbar) is that ISIS first assumed territorial control in Syria nearly three years after the beginning of the war. Therefore, when it assumed responsibility for control, there were no reliable government services. The Syrian state was absent. Against the background of a civil war and the absence of the government, it was easier for ISIS to maintain control and win support in Syria. By contrast, in Iraq, there was no civil war and the government was providing services on a more or less regular basis.

On June 30, ISIS proclaimed a Caliphate in areas it held and named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi caliph (naming him Caliph Ibrahim). It changed the name of the organization to IS, shedding the territorial designation of the previous name. Presumably, this is another stage in the consolidation and monopolization of power by ISIS. On July 5, the newly proclaimed "Caliph" [delivered the khutba \(Friday sermon\) in Mosul's central mosque.](#) Significantly, the proclamation came before ISIS had established complete territorial control and a functioning administration anywhere. Hence, it constituted a declaration of intention and a code of governance for the administration of the future.

Those who are familiar with the modern history of Iraq will find some striking similarities between ISIS's takeover and the Ba'thi coup of 1968. In both cases a small and motivated organization took everyone by surprise. The Ba'this, who also needed to assert their control over the country, used a combination of terror (public executions), intimidation, and rewards to cow the population. The Ba'this also relied on allies in coming to power, and then disposed of at the first opportunity. It seems that Ibrahim 'Awwad Ibrahim (alias Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), the ISIS leader, an Iraqi who served in the Iraqi army and lived under the Ba'th, learned the Ba'thi methods and is employing them. He uses propaganda deliberately and to great effect. His men instill terror in local populations by arranging public executions and posting it on their web sites. ISIS also enters into ad hoc alliances with ideological and political rivals. The main difference between ISIS and the 1968 Ba'this, is that the Ba'th had taken over the institutions of the centralized state (and the capital, Baghdad), which it later

preserved and consolidated. ISIS, on the other hand, is starting from the Sunni provinces outside of Baghdad, and fighting from below against the state.

Unfortunately for ISIS, their allies are the old guard Ba'this, who are expecting that ISIS will turn against them and are preparing for this eventuality. It remains to be seen whether ISIS can overcome these manifold challenges, which are already affecting their hold on the occupied areas. Finding solutions to the challenges of governance and accommodating political rivalry through compromise are traditionally the weak points of a jihadi organization. ISIS's success or failure in generating popular political support and building and maintaining political alliances with Iraq's broader Sunni population and leadership will determine whether it will be able to secure its surprising and considerable territorial gains in Iraq.

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