

The Long Jihad

The Islamic State's Method of Insurgency:
Control, Meaning, & the Occupation of
Mosul in Context

Haroro J. Ingram

Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4079/poe.05.2021.03>

All rights reserved.

©2021 by Program on Extremism Program on Extremism2000

Pennsylvania Avenue NW Washington,

DC 20006 www.extremism.gwu.edu

Cover: © Enzo Lenze

The Long Jihad

**The Islamic State's Method of Insurgency:
Control, Meaning, & the Occupation of Mosul in Context**

Haroro J. Ingram

Executive Summary

This study examines the Islamic State movement's method of insurgency in both its *theory* (as articulated in the group's internal and publicly disseminated documents) and its *practice* via an analysis of its capture and occupation of Mosul. Drawing on a variety of primary source materials including interviews, this paper presents a conceptual model of insurgency arguing that the Islamic State emerges as an exemplar case study of many key strategic mechanisms and psychosocial dynamics that are crucial for understanding modern insurgencies.

To these ends, this study has three key aims. First, it presents a conceptual framework for understanding modern insurgency as a dual contest of control and meaning. This model of insurgency, which builds on a range of sources including a global cross-section of insurgency doctrines, is then applied to the Islamic State. Second, this study analyses fourteen primary source documents that constitute the Islamic State's insurgency canon. It then examines the Islamic State's method of insurgency in practice with a particular focus on the years following its near decimation in 2007-08 through to its occupation of Mosul (circa 2014-17). Third, this study concludes by outlining a suite of research and policy recommendations based on its key conceptual and analytical findings. Overall, it hopes to contribute to not only literature examining the Islamic State but ongoing scholarly and practitioner debates on how best to understand modern insurgencies and its counterstrategy implications.

Introduction

“And from these weapons and methods he should choose those which suit him in each and every stage of his long jihad.”

Excerpt from Al-Naba Editorial, May 2020.

Twenty years since the September 11, 2001, attacks and in the wake of the Taliban’s resurrection to control much of Afghanistan in 2021, it seems fitting to reflect on the tumultuous history of another jihadist insurgency that achieved extraordinary successes against seemingly impossible odds: the Islamic State movement. At the peak of its conventional powers in 2014, the Islamic State controlled around 100,000km² of territory, an estimated total population of almost ten million people, and the major cities of Mosul, Ramadi, Fallujah, Raqqa and Dayr az Zawr on either side of the Syria-Iraq border.¹

The Islamic State’s occupation of Mosul has become emblematic of the movement and its terrifying and tragic potential whether in Iraq and Syria or elsewhere in the world. Yet the three years in which the Islamic State controlled Mosul, with largely conventional politico-military activities, is an historical and strategic anomaly for the group. After all, most of its multidecade history has been spent oscillating through the early phases of an insurgency campaign characterized by guerrilla military and governance (i.e. unconventional politico-military) activities. The persistence of the Islamic State threat, indeed its metastasizing in recent years to now have a presence in dozens of countries across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, is a reminder that there remains much to be learned about this movement and how best to confront it. This study aims to contribute to other scholarship² that has applied an overarching insurgency model to analyze the Islamic State’s approach to insurgency theory and practice.

There is a second, much broader issue it considers too. Despite western nations enjoying unprecedented military, technological, intelligence, and resource advantages over any single nation or coalition of nations, it has been insurgencies in Asia and the Middle East that have defeated western powers and their allies. While many western nations are focusing on rising concerns about the global ‘great power competition’ and dealing with an unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, the fields of research and practice still need to grapple with how best to understand and confront modern insurgencies. Indeed, rather than diminish the need to understand this type of irregular warfare, 21st century conventional power imbalances and intensifying great power rivalries makes this avenue of applied research as important as ever. This study hopes to humbly offer its insights to that discourse.

The purpose of this paper is to address these two interrelated issues by outlining a model of insurgency and applying it as the conceptual framework to shed light on the Islamic State’s approach to insurgency. It argues that modern insurgencies are best understood as competitions for control and meaning, broadly encapsulated in ten key conceptual elements, with the Islamic State emerging as an exemplar of the phenomenon. While this study is limited in its scope to a broad analysis of the Islamic State’s theory and practice of insurgency, it outlines a conceptual framework and points of analytical inquiry that may form the basis for further testing and research. It proceeds in four parts.

Part I presents the model of insurgency that informs this analysis drawing on a variety of

¹ James Dobbins Seth Jones, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, Nathan Chandler, Rolling Back the Islamic State (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2017), xi, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1912.html

² For example, Craig Whiteside, “New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016)”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10(4), 2016. <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/523/1036>; Ahmad Hashim, 2018, *The Caliphate at War*, Hurst Publishers, London.

sources including a global cross-section of insurgency doctrine from the Middle East,³ Asia,⁴ Europe,⁵ and the Americas.⁶ It argues that insurgencies tend to be triadic conflicts characterized by armed groups contesting against each other for the support of civilian populations and control of territory and resources. To these ends, an insurgency will seek to implement its “competitive system of control”⁷ via politico-military activities *and* a “competitive system of meaning” via propaganda and other influence activities. Reflecting an insurgency’s asymmetric disadvantage, this campaign is characterized by phases of increasing conventional politico-military activities during times of strength and a reliance on more unconventional activities during times of comparative weakness. Part I concludes with a ten-point conceptual framework that seeks to encapsulate key strategic mechanisms and psychosocial factors assessed to be crucial for understanding modern insurgencies.

Part II analyzes the Islamic State’s theory of insurgency. Although the Islamic State has not publicly released a coherent singular insurgency doctrine like Mao’s *On Guerrilla Warfare*, Che Guevara’s *Guerrilla Warfare*, or Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin’s *A Practical Course for Guerrilla Warfare*, such a document almost certainly exists. However, given that it is unavailable for analysis, this study draws on fourteen Islamic State publications that arguably represent the core of the movement’s insurgency canon: Zarqawi’s 2004 letter to al-Qaida leaders,⁸ Uthmann bin abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi’s “Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq”,⁹ the internal “lessons learned” document *Analysis of the state of ISI* that assesses the Islamic State of Iraq’s collapse,¹⁰ Abu Hamza al-Muhajir’s “Advice to the leaders of the Islamic State”,¹¹ the “Fallujah Memorandum”,¹² “Media operative, you are also a mujahid”,¹³ “From Hijrah to the Khilafah”,¹⁴ “Principles in the administration of the Islamic State”,¹⁵ Abu Muhammad al-Adnani’s “That they live by proof”,¹⁶ and five *Al Naba* articles on guerrilla warfare.¹⁷ What emerges from this analysis is how the Islamic State’s doctrines of insurgency are an exemplar of the insurgency model in Part I.

³ A.A. Al-Muqrin, ‘A practical course for guerrilla war’ In *Al-Qa’ida’s doctrine for insurgency*. Translated by N. Cigar (Washington D.C.: Potomac, 2009). This also includes the fourteen Islamic State texts see footnotes 12-21.

⁴ Tse-Tung, M. *On Guerrilla Warfare*. Translated by Samuel B. Griffith II (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); H.C. Minh, “Guerrilla Tactics (*Cach Danh Du Kich*)” in O’Dowd, E.C. “Ho Chi Minh and the origins of the Vietnamese doctrine of guerrilla tactics”, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 24, 3 (2013): 567-587; H.C. Minh, *The selected works of Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Prism Key Press, 2011).

⁵ Irish Republican Army. *Handbook for Volunteers of the Irish Republican Army* (Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 1985).

⁶ E. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Breinigsville (PA): BN Publishing, 2007).

⁷ Bernard Fall, “The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency”. *Naval War College Review* [Winter 1998], <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/art5-w98.htm>

⁸ For Zarqawi’s 2004 letter to al-Qaida, including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, “Zarqawi’s Strategy” (2004), *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 37-54.

⁹ Uthmann bin abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi, 2006/07, *Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq*, The Islamic State of Iraq’s Ministry of Shari’ah Organization. The author wishes to thank Dr Craig Whiteside for providing the fully translated text. For an analysis, see Brian Fishman, “Fourth Generation Governance: Sheikh Tamimi defends the Islamic State of Iraq”, *Combating Terrorism Center*, March 23, 2007. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA470056.pdf>

¹⁰ Unknown author, “Analysis of the State of ISI” (NMEC-2007-612449), *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*. <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/analysis-of-the-state-of-isi-original-language-2/>

¹¹ For “Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State” (2007), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, Charlie Winter, 2020, “Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State”, *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 93-106.

¹² For the “Fallujah Memorandum” (2009), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, “The Fallujah Memorandum”, *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 107-145.

¹³ For “Media operative, you are also a mujahid” (2015), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, “Media Jihad”, *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 215-231.

¹⁴ Unknown author, “From Hijrah to Khilafah”, *Dabiq* (issue 1): pp.34-41.

¹⁵ “Principles in the administration of the Islamic State”, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, December 7, 2015. <https://www.meforum.org/5700/islamic-state-master-plan>

¹⁶ For Abu Muhammad al-Adnani’s “That They Live By Proof” (2016), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, “Defining Success & Failure”, *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 249-261.

¹⁶ Unknown author, “From Hijrah to Khilafah”, *Dabiq* (issue 1): pp.34-41.

¹⁷ For translation and analysis of Al-Naba’s four part series “Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the *mujahideen*” see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Islamic State Insurgent Tactics: Translation and Analysis” here: Part 1 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation;> Part 2 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/12/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-1;> Part 3 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/05/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-2;> Part 4 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/05/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-3;> Unknown author, 2020, “Unless swerving (as a strategy) for war or joining (another) company”, *Al-Naba* issue 236, unknown translator, 28 May 2020. Also see “Except for one maneuvering for battle, or retreating to [another fighting] company”, translated by Sam Heller. <https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2020/05/31/the-islamic-state-conceptualizes-guerrilla-warfare/>

Part III broadly examines the Islamic State's long jihad leading to its capture and three-year control of Mosul. This analysis particularly focuses on the decade following the Islamic State of Iraq's downfall beginning in 2007. It draws on primary source materials to examine how the group recovered, rebuilt, and resurged by leveraging a phased politico-military and propaganda strategy to project its competitive systems of control and meaning, and outcompete state and non-state adversaries. Two key findings emerge. First, the Islamic State augmented and amplified the guerrilla politico-military activities that characterized its efforts to rebuild and resurge with a dual strategy of empowering and protecting its "decisive minorities" (e.g. tribal leaders, local politicians) while seeking to eliminate the "decisive minorities" of rivals (e.g. government officials, security personnel).¹⁸ Second, the Islamic State co-opted existing government institutions and staff to rapidly implement a full spectrum, normative, system of control seamlessly integrated into what was essentially a propaganda state whereby all institutions contributed to ingraining the Islamic State's ideology in the population. The Islamic State emerges as an exemplar, in both theory (Part II) and practice (Part III) of the conceptual framework (Part I).

Part IV considers how the Islamic State's method of insurgency has become a primary export to its transnational provinces. Unlike any other time in its history, the Islamic State now has a global reach with affiliates across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Adopting the Islamic State's *manhaj* (method) for establishing an Islamic State and *aqeeda* (creed) are requirements for aspiring provinces (*wilayah*) to be formally accepted by the Islamic State. Understanding these dynamics and its implications will be crucial for both researchers and practitioners. Consequently, this study concludes by outlining research and policy recommendations based on its key findings.

Final Remarks

This study is intentionally broad and sweeping in its conceptual and analytical scope. While it draws heavily on primary source materials, its references include studies that delve into the conceptual, analytical, and empirical details that are necessarily outside the scope of the current analysis. This paper also draws heavily on interview material collected during production of the *Mosul & the Islamic State* podcast offering important firsthand accounts and expert perspectives. Ultimately, this study offers a retrospective of the Islamic State's evolving strategies that were developed and applied in the years leading to its capture and occupation of Mosul while establishing the foundations for future research.

¹⁸ "Decisive minorities" is a reference to those segments of a population that exercise a disproportionate influence over the population due to political (e.g. party affiliation), financial (e.g. wealth), or identity (e.g. religion, ethno-tribal) factors.

Part I: The Strategic Logic of Modern Insurgency

“...an arena of jihad in which the pen and the sword complement each other.”

Excerpt from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's letter to al-Qaida leadership captured by U.S. forces, January 2004.

The purpose of Part I is to establish the conceptual framework of insurgency that broadly informs this study. Drawing on a variety of sources, central of which is a global cross-section of insurgency doctrines, it argues that insurgencies are best understood as dual contests of control and meaning, characterized by phased campaigns spanning from unconventional to hybrid and conventional politico-military activities, that seeks to out-compete adversaries for support of the population and control over territory and resources. In doing so, Part I outlines a framework through which to understand how non-state actors seek to integrate all aspects of power¹⁹ in an asymmetric politico-military competition against materially stronger adversaries.

This study adopts Fall's contention that insurgencies seek to implement a *competitive system of control* by deploying politico-military activities to out-compete adversaries and win the population's support. However, it also argues that insurgencies seek to project a *competitive system of meaning* via propaganda and other influence activities designed to shape how target audiences perceive the conflict and its actors. To these ends, insurgencies seek to leverage a spectrum of behavioral and attitudinal types of support while relying on typically adhoc organizational traits to facilitate the phased transitions that characterize their campaigns over time and space. Part I concludes by outlining a ten-point framework that informs the remainder of this study.

The Fundamentals: Strategic Dimensions, Support, & Organization

“Irregular warfare” is defined by the United States Army and joint forces doctrine as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s).”²⁰ This study focuses on a specific strategy deployed by non-state armed actors within the context of irregular warfare: insurgency. For the purposes of this study, “insurgency” is pragmatically defined as a politico-military struggle, by non-state actors against primarily state actors (but also potentially other non-state actors), that seeks to separate from, change or replace a central authority (e.g. national government), in large part by competing for the support of contested populations and control over territory and resources.²¹ Insurgencies are thus *triadic* conflicts between rival state and non-state armed actors primarily competing for the support of a population. While there is, of course, extraordinary diversity amongst the world's modern insurgencies, what this model of insurgency seeks to do is capture those fundamental features that are *broadly* shared despite those historical, operational, technological, and ideological nuances. To explore the fundamental dynamics of the modern insurgency phenomenon, it is necessary to consider key strategic factors related to the deployment of certain politico-military and communicative activities, variations in support and its implications for insurgency-populace relations, and the role of organizational dynamics.

¹⁹ This includes, but is not limited to, military (violence), financial, political, and informational aspects as well as the impact of both internal and external forces (partly captured in the notion of ‘competition’)

²⁰ Headquarters, Department of Army, 2014, *FM3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, May 2014: p. viv. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/fm3_24.pdf; Also see Department of the Army, 2020, *Doctrine Smart Book*, June 2020. <https://rdl.train.army.mil/catalog-ws/view/100.ATSC/A34D5646-DC61-4BD6-B1DB-B8B2EADAB039-1614119346319/DSBx20200611xwordxv2.pdf>

²¹ To engage in an insurgency is a strategic decision made by non-state actors to use a violent, phased, politico-military effort against a comparatively stronger, typically, state actor. It thus reflects a “choice” made from a variety of possible alternative forms of action. These include at least an initial decision to do something against the status quo and then to use insurgency over other potential violent (e.g. terrorism-centric, sabotage) or non-violent (e.g. protest) alternatives. There are also inevitably decisions that need to be made regarding what calibration of possible insurgency activities will be deployed and when as part of those efforts.

The principal strategic dimensions of an insurgency

This study asserts that insurgencies are broadly characterized by four principal strategic dimensions that are distinct but operate interdependently to degrees that vary from case study to case study:

- *Military*: The use or threat of violence to eliminate, weaken, or coerce rival armed actors (i.e. force-on-force combat)²² and/or the contested population to support oneself and/or cease supporting its adversaries.²³
- *Propaganda*: Communications designed to shape the perceptions, influence the behaviour, and, typically, to polarize the support of target audiences. This dimension encapsulates a variety of potential communicative activities (e.g. propaganda, disinformation, “propaganda of the deed”), communication mediums (e.g. offline and online), and target audiences (e.g. friends, foes, and neutrals).
- *Structural*: The “institutions” of authority that act as the symbols of control for an armed actor. Structures can be political (e.g. constitution), educational (e.g. school), economic (e.g. financial market), legal/judicial (e.g. court system), and physical (e.g. roads). Structures are responsible for or representative of functions.
- *Functional*: The processes of authoritative control exercised by incumbent or aspirant actors that are designed to influence a contested population by governing what is legitimate action. Governance functions are the *pragmatic processes* of which structures are merely symbols.

This report draws heavily on Kilcullen’s scholarship to distinguish between structural and functional dimensions.²⁴ Indeed, the distinction is crucial for understanding the overarching strategic logic of insurgency and distinguishing between its different phases of conventionality. For further clarity, Table 1 provides several examples of the relationship between structures and functions. For instance, a law enforcement agency is a structure, but its functions include security provision and enforcing the laws of an authority. It follows that while a law enforcement structure may exist (i.e. fully staffed and equipped police) it may not be functional (i.e. providing security for the population and enforcing laws). Conversely, non-state actors may provide the security and law enforcement function for a population but without any formal structures.

Table 1: Examples of structures and functions

Governance Type	Example Structure	Example Function
Economic regulation	System of taxation	Tax collection
Rule of law	Law enforcement agency (e.g. police)	Security and law enforcement
Judicial system	Courts	Civil dispute mediation and resolution
Public infrastructure	Roads	Movement of people and trade

²² The term ‘military’ is typically used to describe the activities of regular forces however it is broadly applied here to encapsulate both conventional and unconventional actions.

²³ Military or other similar coercive actions are distinct from violence applied in the enforcement (e.g. policing) or implementation of governance functions such as laws (e.g. execution for criminal offence). Actions such as these are described as “functions”.

²⁴ Kilcullen, D. *Counterinsurgency* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2010) 150-151.

The relationship between structures and functions can sometimes appear ambiguous. For example, a road is a structure, but its main function is to enable the movement of people and trade from one location to another (see Table 1). Thus, function is *never* inherent to the existence of a structure. For example, an armed actor may have a system of taxation articulated on paper as law but, unless tax is being collected, it would not be deemed functional by the population. If a structure is not functional, it will be deemed dysfunctional and, potentially, symbolise the inability of an authority to exercise effective control over a population and, potentially, its ability to functionally outcompete adversaries.²⁵ A structure is merely symbolic of a function that represents the authority's ability to exercise control over a population *and/or* the population's willingness to participate in that authority's system.

It is also useful to make a further distinction between top-down political activities versus bottom-up governance activities. After all, an insurgency may seek to functionally connect with the population through a mix of outreach efforts. Some may involve 'top-down' political activities that aim to build partnerships with established traditional and local authorities which may include co-opting and extorting government officials. Other activities may focus on 'bottom-up' governance activities focused on establishing mechanisms of control over the population.

Spectrum of Support

Despite the term "support" being used ubiquitously in much of the literature, explanations of its meaning and implications are less common. Yet, distinguishing between different types of support is essential given that different strategies inevitably prioritize certain types of support over others. For the rudimentary purposes of this paper, it is useful to think of different types of support as sitting on a spectrum. At one end is *behavioural support* or collaboration which is engagement in actions that benefit an armed actor over others ("the collaborator" type). Moving towards the other end of the spectrum is *attitudinal support* which Khalil defines as "a voluntary preference for a specific group of armed actors over their competitors."²⁶ Building on Khalil, this study draws a further distinction between *pragmatic attitudinal support* as a voluntary preference for one armed group over others based on the perceived benefits of their politico-military efficacy ("the pragmatist" type) and *identity-based attitudinal support* as the *voluntary* preference for an armed group over others due to a shared identity ("the partisan" type). The potential for positive and negative support of both behavioral and attitudinal support types is important for considering the potential variations in support that may emerge within and across populations.²⁷

The collaborator, pragmatist, and partisan ideal types are a useful way to consider the implications of different types of support. For instance, behavioral support can be deceptive and potentially the most superficial as an individual or even entire communities may in fact be "partisans" for the opposition but will temporarily provide behavioral support to one actor (e.g. paying "taxes" or providing information or food) for fleeting situational reasons (e.g. not being killed). Similarly, pragmatic attitudinal support can be transitory in nature as it is largely driven by short-term contextual factors (e.g. support for a particular governance initiative) versus the potentially deeper connections inherent to identity-based attitudinal support. This also underscores the potential fluidity across the three support types and the different psychosocial forces driving decision-making processes. Behavioural and pragmatic attitudinal support tends to reflect "logic of consequence" decision-making (i.e. rational choice by balancing alternatives)²⁸ versus identity-based attitudinal support which typically reflects

²⁵ This is a problem typical of central governments being functionally outcompeted by an insurgency. The institutions of government are present but dysfunctional while the informal "shadow government" of the insurgency may be engaging in key governance functions.

²⁶ James Khalil, 2012, "Insurgent-populace relations in Nepal: an analysis of attitudinal and behavioral support", *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 23(2): 223.

²⁷ Also see, *Ibid*, 225.

²⁸ J. March and C. Heath, *A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen* (New York: Free Press, 1994): Chapter 1.

“logic of appropriateness” decision-making (i.e. choices based on aligning support with identity roles).²⁹

As a general observation, populations of significant size and complexity living amidst a conflict tend to be characterized by largely “apolitical” majority willing to behaviourally support the dominant armed actor. However, there are inevitably people in any given population who either wield disproportionate influence over the population (e.g. those in authority positions, such as government official or tribal leaders) or are actively engaged partisans for one side over others (e.g. perhaps due to kinship ties) and these constitute what could be described as “decisive minorities”. While an insurgency may seek to satiate the needs of the apolitical majority in a population through politico-military dominance, it will, to varying degrees, seek to empower its “partisans”, co-opt and recruit undecided “decisive minorities” and coerce or kill the “partisans” that support its opponents.

Adhocratic organizational traits

If one can accept that there are certain fundamental strategic mechanisms and psychosocial dynamics which are broadly shared by modern insurgencies, then it follows that certain broad organizational traits are also likely to be shared. Drawing on Mintzberg’s seminal research³⁰ on organizational configurations,³¹ this study contends that modern insurgencies (especially in their nascence) tend to be characterized by adhocratic traits. Emerging in complex, dynamic, and uncertain environments, adhocracies are typified by “a structure of interacting project teams” that work towards an overarching purpose and/or the expression of a shared identity.³² While the leadership core may be hierarchical and exert some command and control, adhocracies tend to decentralize decision-making authorities at the operational and tactical levels which gears it towards collaboration and adaption to rapidly changing conditions. This is succinctly captured in the maxim that adhocracies are characterized by centralized command concentrated in a small leadership apex but decentralized management and execution.³³ The environmental conditions within which adhocracies tend to emerge fuels an organization that encourages innovation and flexibility to exploit opportunities as they emerge.³⁴ This responsiveness and adaptability can result in adhocracies cyclically transitioning into more or less formal and bureaucratic organizations to maximize “market” opportunities.³⁵

Adhocracies are uniquely modern organizations that emerge from a world in constant flux that necessitates teams of eclectically skilled experts, often themselves dispersed, needing to creatively solve problems. Wherever these environmental conditions exist and these requirements for an organization emerge, “from guerrilla warfare to space agencies,”³⁶ so too do adhocracies. To cohere the organization ideologically and strategically, adhocracies tend to heavily rely on modern communication technologies and the deployment of specialists and managers who Mintzberg argues, “must be masters of human relations, able to use persuasion, negotiation, coalition, reputation, and rapport to fuse the individualistic experts into smoothly functioning teams.”³⁷ Meanwhile, the strategic apex of such organizations largely focus on maintaining the overarching coherence of the system via conflict mediation, goal

²⁹ J. March and C. Heath, *A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen* (New York: Free Press, 1994): Chapter 2.

³⁰ Mintzberg, H. 1989. ‘The Innovative Organization’, in *Mintzberg on Management*. Free Press, New York: 196-220.

³¹ An examination of trends in the organizational studies literature is beyond the scope of this article. Instead see Perrow, C. 1973. “The short and glorious history of organizational theory”, *Organizational Dynamics* volume 2, issue 1: pp.3-15.

³² Mintzberg, H. 1981. “Organization Design: Fashion or Fit?”, *Harvard Business Review*. January 1981. Available online: <https://hbr.org/1981/01/organization-design-fashion-or-fit> [Accessed 8 February 2019]

³³ The degree to which these organizational characteristics are applicable will vary from case study to case study. Indeed, it may vary within an insurgency dependent on variables such as time and location.

³⁴ Waterman, R. 1990. *Adhocracy*. W.W. Norton Company: New York.

³⁵ See Mintzberg, H. 1981. “Organization Design: Fashion or Fit?”, *Harvard Business Review*. January 1981. Available online: <https://hbr.org/1981/01/organization-design-fashion-or-fit> [Accessed 8 February 2019]

³⁶ Mintzberg, *Mintzberg on Management*, 207.

³⁷ Mintzberg, *Mintzberg on Management*, 207.

reinforcement, and strategy adjustments.

Adhocratic organizational traits result in certain strengths and weaknesses that are inherent to its configuration. Strengths emerging from these traits include innovation, flexibility, and adaption to change. However, adhocracies are susceptible to vulnerabilities such as an overreliance on communication technologies and the deployment of liaison teams because, without their use and deployment, the organization is susceptible to strategic/ideological fraying and structural disintegration. Intra-organizational competition, which tends to be especially pronounced in an adhocracy, can result in operational and ideological extremism on its fringes as different parts of the organization seek to outdo peers and opponents. As Mintzberg argues: “Combining its ambiguities with its interdependencies, the innovative form [adhocracy] can emerge as a rather politicized and ruthless organization – supportive of the fit, as long as they remain fit, but destructive of the weak.”³⁸ This leads to a third weakness which is a tendency towards inappropriately planned and/or timed organizational transitions. For example, adhocracies may underestimate the time, resources, and personnel required to bureaucratize causing strategic problems which can result in “periodically cleansing itself of some of its existing strategic baggage”.³⁹

There is, inevitably, great organizational variability across modern insurgencies. However, the adhocratic traits described here are typically present, to varying degrees, particularly in the nascent phases of an insurgency prior to transitions towards greater conventionality and bureaucratization. The organizational challenge for insurgencies is how to maintain strategic and ideological cohesion while necessarily evolving to survive or exploit the vulnerabilities of their adversaries. After all, engaging in an insurgency is deadly and, ultimately, most insurgencies will be defeated and this should not be surprising given the odds that they tend to face against materially superior adversaries.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, adhocratic traits increase the potential for survival of the group and resilience of its ideology and strategy as conditions change.

Competitive System of Control: The Politico-Military Contest

For centuries, conflicts between guerrillas and more powerful central authorities have been characterized by a largely military-centric contest. This dynamic is epitomized by the colonial wars that emerged with the global expansion of European powers and its strategic principles are captured in works such as C.E. Callwell’s *Small Wars: Their principles and practice*.⁴¹ As Boot argues: “most guerrillas were largely apolitical tribesmen who may have excelled at hit-and-run raiding but had no conception of political mobilization. They did little or nothing to woo undecided people or to undermine the will of the opposing populace, save by brute force.”⁴² In the 20th century a transformation occurs in the strategies deployed by insurgencies that resulted, perhaps most evidently in Vietnam and Afghanistan, in the persistence of 20th and 21st century insurgencies despite the seemingly overwhelming military force and technological capabilities applied against them.

Born from the failings of military-centrism and a greater appreciation for the inherently political nature of modern insurgencies, decades of “soldier-scholars” such as Robert

³⁸ Mintzberg, *Mintzberg on Management*, 218.

³⁹ Mintzberg, *Mintzberg on Management*, 212.

⁴⁰ Boot’s database of insurgencies since 1775 indicates that the success rate of insurgencies have almost doubled since 1945. According to Boot, 20.49% of insurgencies were successful pre-1945 compared to 39.6% of resolved insurgencies since 1945. Max Boot, *Invisible Armies* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 589.

⁴¹ C.E. Callwell, 2015 (original published 1896), *Small Wars: Their Principles & Practice*, Watchmaker Publishing, London.

⁴² Max Boot, *Invisible Armies* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 560.

Thompson,⁴³ Bernard Fall,⁴⁴ David Galula,⁴⁵ David Kilcullen,⁴⁶ John Nagl,⁴⁷ and David Petraeus⁴⁸ have broadly argued that insurgencies seek to implement a politico-military apparatus or, as Fall describes it, a “competitive system of control”⁴⁹ to out-compete their adversaries and win the support of contested populations. This intellectual and strategic evolution in small wars thinking is captured in Falls’s oft-quoted words: “When a country is being subverted it is not being outfought; it is being out-administered”.⁵⁰ Put another way, success in this type of conflict follows the *functional* dominance of an armed actor’s competitive system of control over all others. While the incumbent authority (e.g. the national government) typically enjoys force, resource, and technology supremacy, at least in a conventional sense, this also means that it has structures (e.g. institutions and physical infrastructure) that are static and need to be sufficiently protected to ensure they continue to function. In contrast, an insurgency rarely has fixed military positions or administrative institutions (i.e. structures). Instead, an insurgency will look to establish a suite of core functions designed to undermine the incumbent authority and legitimize their own authority; delaying the formalization of functions with structures for the sake of more immediate functional-dominance or at least competitiveness.

It can be difficult to make like-for-like comparisons between the guerrilla governance efforts of an insurgency and the conventional governance efforts of the nation-state but Migdal’s *Strong Societies & Weak States* highlights four key functions that offer a useful frame. Migdal highlights “the capacities to *penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways”⁵¹ as functional bonds that connect the “fluid” insurgency to the “static” population. To summarize, Kilcullen’s “theory of competitive control”⁵² succinctly describes the *centre of gravity* in modern irregular warfare: “...the local armed actor that a given population perceives as most able to establish a normative system for resilient, full-spectrum control over violence, economic activity, and human security is most likely to prevail within that population’s residential area.”⁵³ Or as David Galula states: “Build (or rebuild) a political machine from the population upward.”⁵⁴

An insurgency may engage in a variety of different politico-military activities that constitute its competitive system of control depending on whether it is focused on guerrilla violence and governance or more conventional efforts. Throughout these phases, insurgencies seek to show that the state’s structures are *dysfunctional* using military attacks and guerrilla governance activities to undermine the incumbent. In doing so, an insurgency may delay the establishment of its own structures by deploying informal/unconventional governance efforts that *functionally* seek to address the population’s needs. A competitive system of control is

⁴³ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

⁴⁴ Bernard Fall, “The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency”. *Naval War College Review* [Winter 1998], <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/art5-w98.htm>

⁴⁵ David Galula, 1964, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory & Practice*, Praeger Security International, Westport.

⁴⁶ David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, Melbourne, Scribe Publications; David Kilcullen, 2009, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, London, Hurst & Company; David Kilcullen, 2013, *Out of the Mountains*, Brunswick, Scribe Publications.

⁴⁷ John A. Nagl, 2005, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya to Vietnam*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

⁴⁸ J.A. Nagl, J.F. Amos, S. Sewall, and D. Petraeus, 2008, *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (No. 3-24), University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

⁴⁹ Fall, B. “The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency”. *Naval War College Review* [Winter 1998], <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/art5-w98.htm>

⁵⁰ Fall, B. “The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency”. *Naval War College Review* [Winter 1998], <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/art5-w98.htm>

⁵¹ Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1988): 4.

⁵² Fall first coined the phrase ‘competitive system of control’ (Fall, “The Theory and Practice...”, online).

⁵³ Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 152.

⁵⁴ D. Galula, *Counter-Insurgency Warfare*, 98. This is echoed in the US Army’s COIN manual: “Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies; each side aims to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate”, see J.A. Nagl, J.F. Amos, S. Sewall, and D. Petraeus, *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (No. 3-24) (University of Chicago Press. 2008) 1-1. Long similarly asserts that insurgencies establish “...‘counterinstitutions’ to provide what the government could or would not (e.g. taxation or social services)” A. Long, *On “Other War”: Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2006) 22.

primarily calibrated towards winning the behavioral support of contested populations. As Kalyvas argues: "...collaboration is largely endogenous to control though, of course, high rates of collaboration spawned by control at a given point in time are likely to reinforce it in the future."⁵⁵ Put simply, support tends to follow strength. However, this study goes further to argue that there is an equally important contest that involves the projection of a *competitive system of meaning*.

Competitive System of Meaning: The Perception Contest

This analysis draws on a global cross-section of insurgency thinkers: Mao Tse-Tung's *On Guerrilla Warfare*⁵⁶ and Ho Chi Minh's *Cach Danh Du Kich* ('Guerrilla Tactics')⁵⁷ from Asia, al-Muqrin's 'A Practical Course for Guerrilla War'⁵⁸ from the Middle East, the Irish Republican Army's 'Handbook for Volunteers'⁵⁹ from Europe, and Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*⁶⁰ from the Americas.⁶¹ Despite this literature spanning over eight decades and emerging from different parts of the world, there is broad strategic similarities across the sample. The overarching principle common across this collection is the central role of propaganda as a mechanism to not only shape how the politico-military activities of the insurgency and its rivals are perceived but persuade the population to support its cause over others. Distilled to a simple maxim, insurgency could be described as "armed propaganda". For example, Guevara argues that guerrilla fighters are both social reformers⁶² and combatants⁶³ requiring that "every act of the guerrilla army ought always to be accompanied by the propaganda necessary to explain the reasons for it."⁶⁴ Mao's pioneering guerrilla warfare doctrine centralises propaganda as both a catalyst for the revolution and a "glue" connecting the movement's strategic dimensions: "All our strength must be used to spread the doctrine of armed resistance to Japan, to arm the people, to organize self-defense units, and to train guerrilla bands."⁶⁵ As Taber asserts in his seminal *War of the Flea*:

The guerrilla fighter is primarily a propagandist, an agitator, a disseminator of the revolutionary idea, who uses the struggle itself – the actual physical conflict – as an instrument of agitation. His primary goal is to raise the level of revolutionary anticipation, and then of popular participation, to the crisis point at which the revolution becomes general throughout the country and the people in their masses carry out the final task – the destruction of the existing order and (often but not always) of the army that defends it.⁶⁶

In a trend reflected across the sample, military and functional governance activities emerge as important mechanisms for both maximising the resonance of the insurgency's propaganda, confronting the incumbent authority, and building relationships with contested populations. Minh highlights the important role of guerrilla governance activities as a mechanism to connect with the population stating: "To know how to assist the people is also to respect them. Help them to harvest crops, and organise literary classes for local militia and army men."⁶⁷ Guevara similarly states: "In view of the importance of relations with the peasants, it is necessary to create organizations that make regulations for them, organizations that exist not

⁵⁵ S. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12.

⁵⁶ Tse-Tung, M. *On Guerrilla Warfare*. Translated by Samuel B. Griffith II (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000)

⁵⁷ H.C. Minh, "Guerrilla Tactics (*Cach Danh Du Kich*)" in O'Dowd, E.C. "Ho Chi Minh and the origins of the Vietnamese doctrine of guerrilla tactics", *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 24, 3 (2013): 567-587; H.C. Minh, *The selected works of Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Prism Key Press, 2011).

⁵⁸ A.A. Al-Muqrin, 'A practical course for guerrilla war' In *Al-Qa'ida's doctrine for insurgency*. Translated by N. Cigar (Washington D.C.: Potomac, 2009).

⁵⁹ Irish Republican Army. *Handbook for Volunteers of the Irish Republican Army* (Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 1985).

⁶⁰ E. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Breinigsville (PA): BN Publishing, 2007).

⁶¹ This sample does not include fourteen Islamic State produced publications analyzed in Part II to avoid skewing the conceptual framework.

⁶² Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 31-33.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p.33-43.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 66.

⁶⁵ Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 110.

⁶⁶ R. Taber, *War of the Flea* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2002) 12.

⁶⁷ Minh, H.C. "Instructions given at the conference reviewing the second Le Hong Phong military campaign" in *The selected works of Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Prism Key Press, 2011), 96.

only within the liberated area, but also have connections in the adjacent areas. Precisely through these connections it is possible to penetrate a zone for a future engagement of the guerrilla front.”⁶⁸ In other words, military and functional governance initiatives (i.e. without a conventional bureaucracy), which are primarily designed to achieve behavioural support from the population, can act as “vehicles” for forging deeper attitudinal support (or more) and expanding the insurgency’s influence. Put another way, it is through constant engagement with contested populations that, over time, people can be transformed from mere collaborators and pragmatists to partisans.

While the bulk of the content in these insurgency doctrines is devoted to military guidance, this is largely due to its readership being civilians with little military experience than a call for adopting a military-centric campaign. For all the variations in military advice across the sample though, a broad strategic principle is shared across these works: sacrifice territorial and population control (i.e. conventionalizing politico-military efforts by establishing structures) for time to strengthen popular support. As Mao asserts: “...the primary functions of guerrillas are three: first, to conduct a war on... the rear of the enemy; second, to establish bases; and, last, to extend the war areas.”⁶⁹ It is a sentiment echoed by both Guevara⁷⁰ and al-Muqrin.⁷¹ The application of military force thus has a dual purpose: to demonstrate military efficacy against the stronger incumbent authority *and* leverage violence to enable functional reach into the population. Indeed, much of the insurgency’s use of violence is designed to elicit a response from their stronger rivals to coax them into actions that will fuel conditions that are conducive to revolution, e.g. increase perceptions of crisis in the contested population, to frame the insurgency as the only viable solution. As politico-military capabilities reach symmetry, the insurgency increasingly looks to conventionalize its forces and establish structures (e.g. institutions with bureaucracies) to formalise its governance functions.

An insurgency deploys propaganda synchronized with actions to project a competitive system of meaning, i.e. a lens through which target audiences are expected to understand the conflict, its actors and themselves, which is ultimately designed to shape their perceptions and polarize their support.⁷² This system of meaning is largely constructed through propaganda that links enemies (i.e. out-group identities) to perceptions of crisis and the insurgency as champions of a narrowly defined in-group identity, that is shared with constituents in the population, and thus the only hope of solving these crises.⁷³ In doing so, the competitive system of meaning becomes a powerful mechanism for winning identity-based support. There is a practical imperative driving these efforts: against better resourced adversaries, the populace’s support for the insurgency must withstand the hardships of this type of conflict. The Irish Republican Army’s handbook identifies three core objectives of a guerrilla strategy: (i.) drain the enemy’s manpower and resources, (ii.) lead the resistance of the people to enemy occupation, and (iii.) break down the enemy’s administration.⁷⁴ It goes onto remind its readers that, “He [the guerrilla] achieves the second [leading the population to resist enemy

⁶⁸ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 66.

⁶⁹ Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 94-95.

⁷⁰ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 14.

⁷¹ Al-Muqrin, “A practical course for...”, 93.

⁷² Haroro J. Ingram, 2016, *Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamic Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility & Behavioral Change*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague no.9. Available online: <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2016/09/ICCT-Ingram-Deciphering-the-Siren-Call-of-Militant-Islamist-Propaganda-September2016.pdf>

⁷³ Linkage-based analysis is method specifically designed to analyze the *competitive system of meaning* projected by an insurgency via its propaganda messaging. For studies that have applied the linkage-method see Berger, JM. *Extremism*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2018; ElSayed, Lilah, Zeiger, Sara, Chung, Muna, and Atamuradova, Farangiz. *Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree: Establishing a system of meaning through ISIS education*, Program on Extremism, 2021; Ingram, Haroro J. “The strategic logic of Islamic State’s full-spectrum propaganda,” *ISIS Propaganda: A Full-Spectrum Extremist Message*, Oxford University Press, New York (2020): pp. 20-49; Reed, Alastair, Dowling, Jennifer. “The role of historical narratives in extremist propaganda”, *Defense Strategic Communications*, volume 4, Spring 2018: pp.79-104; Whittaker, Joe, Elsayed, Lilah. “Linkages as a lens: An exploration of strategic communications in P/CVE”, *Journal of Deradicalization*, number 20 (2019); Kiriloi M. Ingram, 2021, “An analysis of Islamic State’s gendered propaganda targeted towards women” From territorial control to insurgency”, *Terrorism & Political Violence*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2021.1919637>.

⁷⁴ Irish Republican Army, *Handbook for Volunteers*, 9.

occupation] by remembering that the people will bear the brunt of the enemy's reprisal tactics and by inspiring them with aims of the movement. In this way they will be made tenacious and strong for in the long run it is the people who can stop the enemy: by their backing of the national movement".⁷⁵

Mao similarly believed that propaganda synchronized with action was vital for winning a deeper, sustainable support from the population: "The anti-Japanese idea must be an ever-present conviction, and if it is forgotten, we may succumb to the temptations of the enemy or be overcome with discouragements. In a war of long duration, those whose conviction that the people must be emancipated is not deep rooted are likely to become shaken in their faith or actually revolt."⁷⁶ For Guevara, the insurgency had to closely interact with the population to mutually boost revolutionary commitment: "...as a product of this interaction between the guerrilla fighter and his people, a progressive radicalization appears which further accentuates the revolutionary characteristics of the movement and gives it a national scope."⁷⁷ While the fundamental purpose of an insurgency may be to build a political machine from the ground upward, that political machine relies on persuasion to fuel and sustain it. The weaker actor in this asymmetric conflict (i.e. the insurgency) inevitably has a deeper appreciation for this reality and this is reflected in the centralization of propaganda in their campaigns.

Insurgency as a contest between rival systems of control & meaning: A framework

The approach to understanding modern insurgency outlined in this study conceptualizes it as a conflict characterized by competitive systems of control and meaning. The implementation of a system of control is the *raison d'être* of irregular warfare and the feature that distinguishes an insurgency from other violent non-state forms of revolutionary resistance (e.g. a campaign of sabotage or terror). It is for this reason that insurgencies seek to overcome their asymmetric disadvantages by initially engaging in unconventional politico-military activities via guerrilla military operations and informal governance to *functionally* outcompete their conventionally superior adversaries. As symmetry is reached, insurgencies look to transition towards more conventional politico-military activities such as establishing structures (e.g. government bureaucracies and institutions) to formalize their functional dominance.⁷⁸ While the ascendancy of one's system of control is the *measure* of success for an insurgency, the *means* for an insurgency to achieve that objective is to outcompete their rivals in shaping the perceptions and polarizing the support of contested populations. As graphically illustrated in Figure 1, insurgency theory and practice tend to centralize the role of propaganda as a means to shape how contested populations perceive not only the insurgency's politico-military apparatus but the politico-military and informational efforts of its enemies.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 88.

⁷⁷ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 33.

⁷⁸ Although this is also an issue of timing and how best to frame these transitions and so it is important to acknowledge that this formalization via structures may not always be indicative of functional dominance but an effort to project that sense.

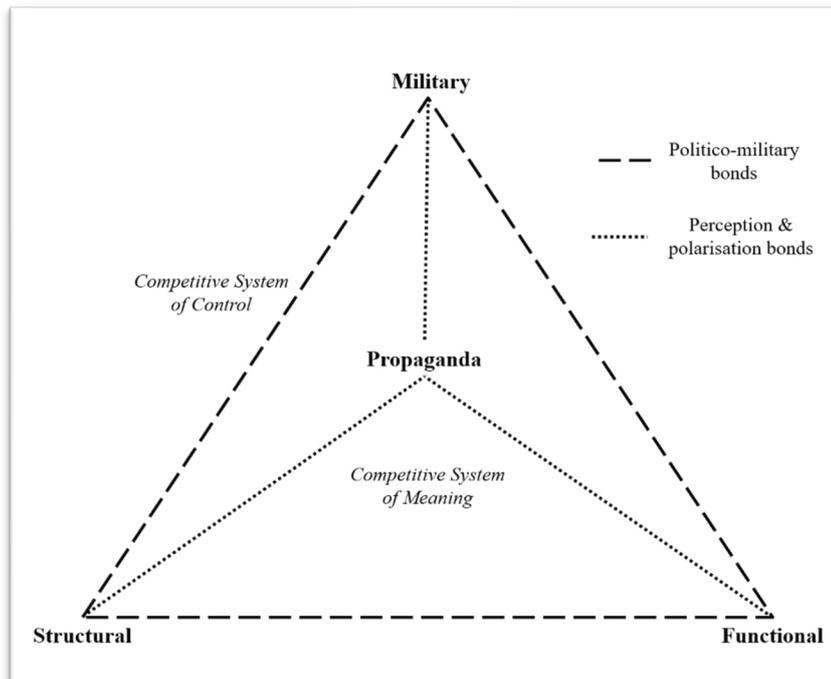


Figure 1: Competing Systems of Control & Meaning

The framework of modern insurgency presented here seeks to conceptually capture what appear to be vital strategic and psychosocial factors largely acknowledged by the fields of research and practice. Scholars such as Fall, Kilcullen, and others emphasize functional dominance as the crucial factor in assessing the efficacy of an insurgency. The observation that underpins the model proposed by this study is that an insurgency which is appropriately *balanced* across its competitive system of control and meaning for the strategic conditions in which it is operating is more likely to endure in its current campaign phase. For example, if an insurgency is engaging in guerrilla violence and governance activities, then it needs to be appropriately “balanced” for those operations and strategic conditions. This “balance” will naturally be different if it is engaging in hybrid conventional military and governance activities. This is partly why periods of transition from one campaign phase to another are times of heightened vulnerabilities – whether “up” towards greater conventionality during times of strength or “down” towards more unconventionality. Strategically and organizationally, an insurgency will look to co-opt existing institutions to expedite transitions towards conventionality while rationalizing to expedite transitions to unconventional politico-military efforts.

Understanding modern insurgency as a dual contest of control and meaning also helps to highlight how insurgencies attempt to leverage the full spectrum of behavioural, pragmatic attitudinal and identity-based attitudinal types of support. It is broadly accepted in the literature that the success of a system of control requires *coherence* across military, structural, and functional dimensions relative to the campaign phase and the adversary.⁷⁹ Yet, even if the resource and technological advantages of the incumbent authority enable it to “win” the population’s behavioural support, if the insurgency’s system of meaning has ascendancy in that population it is highly unlikely that its collaboration with the government will be sufficiently sustained to later transition to deeper attitudinal support. Understanding the identity topography of the contested population and appreciating the acute sense of crisis that defines their psychosocial conditions is crucial to maximising the efficacy of the entire system. Indeed, the likelihood that an insurgency will succeed or not may depend on how nuanced an

⁷⁹ For a detailed thesis of competitive control theory see Kilcullen, D. *Out of the Mountains* (Brunswick: Scribe Publications, 2013), Chapter 3.

understanding of the population's identity topography it is able to generate and exploit.

To summarize, at the heart of this model are ten conceptual elements which contend that insurgencies ...

1. seek to implement a competitive system of control via politico-military activities and a competitive system of meaning via propaganda and other influence activities to out-compete adversaries for the support of contested populations and control territory and resources;
2. transition through campaign phases characterized by guerrilla military and governance activities in its early stages and more hybrid/conventional activities based on relative strengths and vulnerabilities in later stages;
3. constantly grapple with how best to balance military, propaganda, functional, and structural activities throughout these phases but primarily focus on three key goals: exploiting opportunities to achieve functional advantage, imposing a functional disadvantage on adversaries, and using propaganda accordingly as a force multiplier/nullifier;
4. engage in both top-down political activities designed to coerce/recruit established authorities and bottom-up governance activities to win the support of contested populations;
5. centralize propaganda in their campaign plans to amplify the impact and reach of their actions, nullify the impact and reach of adversaries, and project a competitive system of meaning to friends, enemies and neutrals;
6. target supportive "decisive minorities" for alliance building and recruitment while looking to intimidate or kill "decisive minorities" that support opponents;
7. seek to build momentum for their campaigns through cumulative, cyclical and reinforcing effects;
8. co-opt established government institutions to expedite transitions up campaign phases towards greater conventionality;
9. rationalize to expedite transitions down phases towards great unconventionality; and
10. gauge successes and failures by standards relative to both the campaign phase at the time and the adversary's strengths and weaknesses.

Final Remarks

Irregular wars are the violent eruption of competing forces for control attempting to fill a politico-military vacuum. This politico-military combustion is characterised by a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces. Encapsulated in the competitive system of control are top-down forces as authorities attempt to implement control over contested populations. The bottom-up forces of a population's identity topography and the perceptions of crisis which inevitably characterise its psychosocial condition are crucial factors that shape how contested populations perceive the conflict and make decisions. This model thus addresses a growing recognition that insurgencies are as much battles of perceptions as kinetic ones. To maximise the resonance of both its propaganda and its politico-military activities, it is necessary for the insurgency to understand and leverage the identity topography of the contested population *and* their perceptions of crisis. This is important for not only luring its rivals into actions that will increase perceptions of crisis *and* engaging in politico-military activities to address the populace's needs but increase the pool of those who will be partisans for the insurgency's cause. In this complex, deadly, and finely balanced competition, there is no perfect strategic mix just a constant struggle to outcompete rivals. This conceptual framework is broadly applied to inform the remainder of this study arguing that the Islamic State emerges as an exemplar of this model.

Part II: The Islamic State's insurgency canon

“There is no doubt in our mind that limiting jihad to military efforts alone is foolish, especially in Iraq.”

Excerpt from the Fallujah Memorandum, 2009.

Drawing on the model of insurgency developed in Part I, Part II analyzes the Islamic State's writings on insurgency. The Islamic State has published prolifically on its approach to war, governance, and communications over the decades and so it is possible to identify the movement's broad approach to insurgency theory by drawing upon primary sources. This study focuses on fourteen texts which arguably represent the core of the Islamic State's insurgency canon: Zarqawi's 2004 letter to al-Qaida leaders,⁸⁰ Uthmann bin abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi's "Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq",⁸¹ the internal "lessons learned" document assessing the Islamic State of Iraq's collapse,⁸² Abu Hamza al-Muhajir's "Advice to the leaders of the Islamic State",⁸³ the "Fallujah Memorandum",⁸⁴ "Media operative, you are also a mujahid",⁸⁵ "From Hijrah to the Khilafah",⁸⁶ "Principles in the administration of the Islamic State",⁸⁷ Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's "That they live by proof",⁸⁸ and five *Al Naba* articles on guerrilla warfare.⁸⁹ The rationale for selecting these texts is that each directly addresses and provides guidance on issues related to military, governance, and/or propaganda activities relevant to mounting a multi-phased insurgency campaign.⁹⁰

It is, of course, important to highlight that these fourteen texts represent a small sample drawn from an enormous breadth of primary sources. Inevitably, there are sources which could have been included or excluded in this sample. However, the fourteen sources that have been selected capture the spectrum of principles that characterize the Islamic State's approach to insurgency spanning most of its history. The fourteen texts span a seventeen-year period from 2004-2020. The collection thus captures three periods in which the Islamic State was predominantly engaged in guerrilla warfare and governance, circa 2004-06, 2008-13, 2017-present. It also covers two periods of hybrid/conventional politico-military activities, a more aspirational period circa 2006-2007, and its peak conventional period circa 2014-2017. An important criterion for selecting these fourteen texts was that the collection provide sufficient strategic and thematic coverage of the Islamic State's overarching approach to insurgency.

⁸⁰ For Zarqawi's 2004 letter to al-Qaida, including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, "Zarqawi's Strategy" (2004), *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 37-54.

⁸¹ Uthmann bin abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi, 2006/07, *Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq*, The Islamic State of Iraq's Ministry of Shari'ah Organization. The author wishes to thank Dr Craig Whiteside for the fully translated text.

⁸² Unknown author, "Analysis of the State of ISI" (NMEC-2007-612449), *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*. <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/analysis-of-the-state-of-isi-original-language-2/>

⁸³ For "Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State" (2007), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, "Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State", *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 93-106.

⁸⁴ For the "Fallujah Memorandum" (2009), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, "The Fallujah Memorandum", *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 107-145.

⁸⁵ For "Media operative, you are also a mujahid" (2015), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, "Media Jihad", *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 215-231.

⁸⁶ Unknown author, "From Hijrah to Khilafah", *Dabiq* (issue 1): pp.34-41.

⁸⁷ "Principles in the administration of the Islamic State", translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, December 7, 2015. <https://www.meforum.org/5700/islamic-state-master-plan>

⁸⁸ For Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's "That They Live By Proof" (2016), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, "Defining Success & Failure", *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 249-261.

⁸⁸ Unknown author, "From Hijrah to Khilafah", *Dabiq* (issue 1): pp.34-41.

⁸⁹ For translation and analysis of Al-Naba's four part series "Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the *mujahideen*" see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Islamic State Insurgent Tactics: Translation and Analysis" here: Part 1 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation;> Part 2 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/12/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-1;> Part 3 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/05/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-2;> Part 4 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/05/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-3;> Unknown author, 2020, "Unless swerving (as a strategy) for war or joining (another) company", *Al-Naba* issue 236, unknown translator, 28 May 2020. Also see "Except for one maneuvering for battle, or retreating to [another fighting] company", translated by Sam Heller. <https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2020/05/31/the-islamic-state-conceptualizes-guerrilla-warfare/>

⁹⁰ The author acknowledges that this list could have included countless other texts and that potentially valid arguments could be made for certain texts being replaced with others.

The Pen & The Sword: Meaning & Control in the Islamic State's Wars

Table 2 broadly categorizes the fourteen texts by its strategic and thematic focus. Category 1 texts provide an overarching perspective on the strategic logic of the Islamic State's phased insurgency strategy. Category 2 texts tend to focus on those periods of transition between different phases of the insurgency. Category 3 are most relevant to guerrilla warfare and governance while Category 4 focus on approaches to conventional/hybrid military and governance activities. Of course, these categories are broad, and most texts address a range of topics covered in the other categories to varying degrees. What emerges from the proceeding analysis is how the Islamic State's "theory" of insurgency reflects the model of insurgency in Part I *and* its striking similarities with the ideas expressed in other insurgency doctrines.

Table 2: The Fourteen Texts of the Islamic State's Insurgency Doctrine

Category 1: Holistic	Category 2: Transition	Category 3: Guerrilla war and governance	Category 4: Conventional/Hybrid military and governance
<p><i>From Hijrah to Khilafah</i></p> <p><i>That They Live By Proof</i></p> <p><i>Media Operative, You are also a Mujahid</i></p>	<p><i>Zarqawi's Letter to Al-Qaida Leadership</i></p> <p><i>Analysis of the State of ISI</i></p> <p><i>Fallujah Memorandum</i></p>	<p><i>Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State</i></p> <p><i>Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the mujahideen (Parts 1-4)</i></p> <p><i>Unless swerving (as a strategy) for war or joining (another) company</i></p>	<p><i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i></p> <p><i>Principles in the administration of the Islamic State</i></p>

Principles of Forever War: Progressive phases of synchronized messages & action

The Islamic State's *manhaj* (methodology) to establish a caliphate advocates for an insurgency strategy characterized by progressive phases of increasingly conventional military and governance activities. In the 2014 article "From Hijrah to Khilafah" which was published soon after its capture of Mosul, the Islamic State asserts that its *manhaj* reflects that of the Prophet Muhammad and that it has been applied by previous iterations of the movement declaring: "This has always been the roadmap towards Khilafah for the mujahidin."⁹¹ It identifies five phases in its method consisting of *hijrah* (migration), *jama'ah* (organization), destabilize *taghut*, *tamkin* (consolidation), and *Khilafah*. It argues that:

...these phases consist of immigrating to a land with a weak central authority to use as a base where a *jama'ah* can form, recruit members, and train them. If such a land does not exist or *hijrah* is not possible, the place can be formed through long campaigns of *nikayah* [injury] attacks carried out by underground *mujahid* cells.

These attacks will compel apostate forces to partially withdraw from rural territory and regroup in major urban regions. The *jama'ah* would then take advantage of the situation by increasing the chaos to a point leading to the complete collapse of the *taghut* regime in entire areas, a situation some refer to as "*tawahhush*" (mayhem). The next step would be to fill the vacuum by managing the state of affairs to the point of developing into a full-fledged state, and continuing expansion into territory still under control of the *taghut*.⁹²

Ideological framing aside, the strategic principles contained in this excerpt would be *broadly* recognized by any of the authors of the insurgency doctrines cited in Part I. Indeed, the Islamic State's approach reflects key fundamentals of modern insurgency thinking. Against

⁹¹ Unknown author, "From Hijrah to Khilafah", *Dabiq* (issue 1): p.39.

⁹² *Ibid* p.38.

adversaries with a superior *competitive system of control*, it calls for deploying guerrilla military and governance activities as part of its system of control to weaken the status quo and fuel perceptions of crisis in the civilian population. As the central authority's governance structures are rendered dysfunctional and force symmetry is reached, the functional void is filled by the Islamic State until, with time, a full spectrum, conventional system of control (i.e. the state) is implemented. As Omar Mohammed, who reported under the pen name of "Mosul Eye" from inside the Islamic State occupied city, explained in *Mosul & the Islamic State*, "Daesh [the Islamic State] created the chaos and then it [claimed to] cure the chaos."⁹³

The Islamic State acknowledges that it can also move "back" through these phases to adopt increasingly unconventional guerrilla warfare and governance activities. As Abu Muhammad al-Adnani declared in his final speech, *That They Live By Proof*:

Indeed, victory is the defeat of one's opponent. Or do you, O America, consider defeat to be the loss of a city or the loss of land?⁹⁴ Were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land? And would we be defeated and you be victorious if you were to take Mosul or Sirte or Raqqah or even take all the cities and we were to return to our initial condition? Certainly not! True defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight."⁹⁵

To sustainably operationalize its forever war, the Islamic State offers a framework of strategic principles which its commanders and soldiers can selectively draw upon dependent on the conditions that they face. A 2020 *Al Naba* editorial states: "The mujahid may use any permitted weaponing or fighting method to achieve the goal of his jihad, which is defeating his enemy and establishing the religion of Allah in the land where He granted empowerment (*tamkin*). And from these weapons and methods he should choose those which suit him in each and every stage of his long jihad."⁹⁶ At one end of the spectrum, "fighting on fixed fronts and against creeping armies in order to conquer the land is a suitable fighting method for the stage of empowerment."⁹⁷ This is a reference to the use of hybrid-conventional military and governance activities. On the other end, "...the method of fighting the fleeing gangs is most suitable for the mujahidin in those areas where the mushrikin took total control." These are the Islamic State's guerrilla military and governance activities. It is important to delve deeper into detail within these different campaign phases.

Guerrilla Military & Governance Activities: Control & Meaning Below the Tamkin Threshold

The Islamic State's guidance for the guerrilla warfare and governance stages of its campaign is clear: "the primary objective of guerrilla warfare is to inflict harm to the enemies."⁹⁸ For the Islamic State, these are operations that are conducted below the threshold of *tamkin* when it does not control territories or populations. The four-part *Al Naba* series "Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the *mujahideen*",⁹⁹ emphasizes that the use of

⁹³ Omar Mohammed, 2021, "Episode 3: Betrayed", *Mosul & the Islamic State*.

⁹⁴ For Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's "That They Live By Proof" (2016), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, "Defining Success & Failure", *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 251.

⁹⁴ Unknown author, "From Hijrah to Khilafah", *Dabiq* (issue 1): pp.34-41.

⁹⁵ For Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's "That They Live By Proof" (2016), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, "Defining Success & Failure", *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 249-261.

⁹⁵ Unknown author, "From Hijrah to Khilafah", *Dabiq* (issue 1): pp.34-41.

⁹⁶ Unknown author, 2020, "Unless swerving (as a strategy) for war or joining (another) company", *Al-Naba* issue 236, unknown translator, 28 May 2020.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ For translation and analysis of Al-Naba's four part series "Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the *mujahideen*" see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Islamic State Insurgent Tactics: Translation and Analysis" here: Part 1 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation>; Part 2 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/12/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-1>; Part 3 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/05/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-2>; Part 4 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/05/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-3>; Unknown author, 2020, "Unless swerving (as a strategy) for war or joining (another) company", *Al-Naba* issue 236, unknown translator, 28 May 2020. Also see "Except for one maneuvering

terrorist tactics and guerrilla warfare assaults are neither new or specific to a particular region but rather “the mujahideen have always used it in times when there is no *tamkin*.”¹⁰⁰ Patience during this phase is a common theme with the Islamic State’s guidance asserting that *tamkin* is the inevitable result of this *exhaustion* strategy which is as much about the erosion of the enemy’s morale and resolve as it is the destruction of lives and property.

It would be a mistake to misinterpret the Islamic State’s advice on operations below the level of *tamkin* as a call for indiscriminate nihilistic violence. Rather, violence is one of many powerful levers that need to be deployed to shape the perceptions and polarize the support of contested populations. Zarqawi’s letter to al-Qaida leadership that was intercepted by U.S. forces in 2004 epitomizes the principles of the Islamic State movement’s approach to guerrilla warfare.¹⁰¹ It opens with a sweeping assessment of the political, ethnic, and sectarian divides in Iraq and the major levers which Zarqawi believes are the key to fueling conditions which will be conducive to his group’s success. For Zarqawi, extreme violence was the means to spark a triangular war in Iraq between U.S. forces and Iraq’s Sunni and Shi’a populations. He argues that “the only solution is for us to strike the religious, military, and other cadres among the Shi’a with blow after blow.”¹⁰² Yet the purpose of these attacks was not just to target Iraq’s Shi’a but incite cycles of violence in which Iraq’s Sunnis would be plunged into a crisis of stark choices. “This is what we want, and, whether they like it or not, many Sunni areas will stand with the mujahidin.”¹⁰³ Throughout the Islamic State’s insurgency writing the group acutely understands that actions alone will not suffice. Propaganda is necessary too. As Zarqawi asserts, “[this is] an arena of jihad in which the pen and the sword complement each other.”¹⁰⁴ It is useful to briefly consider the Islamic State’s approach to guerrilla operations with a focus on two key themes: establish a system of meaning and achieve functional advantage.

Establishing a system of meaning: propaganda, identity, and engagement

Propaganda is afforded a central role in the Islamic State’s insurgency strategy. The group’s much venerated propagandists are the chief architects of the Islamic State’s competitive system of meaning which it projects to friends and foes alike. As its propaganda doctrine states:

The media operative brothers – may Allah the Almighty protect them – are charged with shielding the ummah from the mightiest onslaught ever known in the history of the Crusader and Safavid wars! They are the security valve for the *sharia* of the Merciful. They are warding off an invasion, the danger of which exceeds even the danger of the military invasion. It is an intellectual invasion that is faced by the Muslims in both their minds and their hearts, corrupting the identity of many of them, distorting their ideas, inverting their concepts, substituting their traditions, drying the headwaters of their faith and deadening their zeal.¹⁰⁵

Seeking to understand the identity topography of contested populations and exploit it has been a hallmark of the Islamic State’s politico-military and propaganda activities captured in publications like Zarqawi’s 2004 letter and the *Fallujah Memorandum*. It is a practice succinctly captured in Whiteside’s description of the Islamic State as “accidental ethnographers.”¹⁰⁶ Of course its propagandists also had a key role to play in this regard: “...it

for battle, or retreating to [another fighting] company”, translated by Sam Heller. <https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2020/05/31/the-islamic-state-conceptualizes-guerrilla-warfare/>

¹⁰⁰ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Islamic State Insurgent Tactics: Translation and Analysis” here: Part 1 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation>

¹⁰¹ For more see, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, “Zarqawi’s Strategy” (2004), *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 37-54.

¹⁰² “Zarqawi’s Strategy” (2004) in *The ISIS Reader*: p. 47.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid p.48.

¹⁰⁵ “Media Jihad” in *The ISIS Reader*: p. 224.

¹⁰⁶ Craig Whiteside & Anas Elallame, 2020, “Accidental ethnographers: the Islamic State’s tribal engagement experiment”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31(2).

is upon you – O media operative of the caliphate – to be cognizant of the need for people in general and the *mujahidin* in particular to be aware of the issues facing the Islamic *umma*.”¹⁰⁷

The 2009 internal “lessons learned” document produced in the aftermath of the Islamic State of Iraq’s near decimation in 2007 highlighted poor understanding of the local population as a strategic weakness that needed to be addressed as part of its resurgence planning:

Before anything we need [to] collect information about the percentage of workers, religions, sects, ethnicities, political affiliations, resources, the income per capita, available jobs, the nature of existing tribes and clans, and the security problems. It’s impossible for any Jama’ah to continue jihad and rule if they don’t analyze the citizens’ structure and know if they will be able to accept the Shari’ah for the long term, and live this life and the after-life in this manner.¹⁰⁸

Recognizing that its on-the-ground commanders were vital for leveraging this understanding into practice, the Islamic State’s minister of war, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, authored *Advice to the leaders of the Islamic State* offering practical guidance to them.¹⁰⁹ Written in a similar tone to Guevara’s *On Guerrilla Warfare*, a clear theme to emerge is the importance which al-Muhajir places on building relationships with the population and selecting the right personnel for the role of engaging with the population. “Choose well when selecting a messenger to communicate with tribes and armed groups, and likewise when selecting someone to take control over checkpoints and bring the people to account, for to the people they are the face of the State.”¹¹⁰ In many ways, al-Muhajir’s *Advice to the leaders of the Islamic State* is precisely the type of guidance that is essential for an adhococracy to ensure coherence of action and message across time and space.

Achieve functional dominance

Addressing political and governance voids via informal functional governance activities is a central theme in the insurgency doctrines analyzed in Part I. It is also a key feature of the *Fallujah Memorandum* which is arguably the Islamic State’s blueprint for rebuilding from defeat in 2007-08 and achieving its extraordinary successes through 2013-14 onwards.¹¹¹ In this sense, the *Fallujah Memorandum* could be interpreted as a “transitional” text in the sense that it focuses on the strategies required to drive transformations from guerrilla war and governance, and through the *tamkin* threshold. Written in 2009, the text is particularly focused on how the Islamic State can exploit the future withdrawal of U.S forces from Iraq. Indeed, by the time US force withdrawal from Iraq is complete in December 2011, the Islamic State’s insurgency campaign is escalating. Synchronizing the functional governance efforts of its system of control with a messaging and influence campaign designed to ingrain its system of meaning in key sectors of the population (i.e. decisive minorities), the authors of the *Fallujah Memorandum* declare:

We can claim that the next war will be primarily a political and a media war. The winner of this war will be the one who can prepare and plan for the period after American troops’ withdrawal. This will allow the winner to promote themselves among people and to completely take charge of guiding Iraq, directing it towards either the winner’s approach or a betrayal, a nationalistic approach or an Islamic approach.¹¹²

Functionally undermining the central government was deemed crucial: “...waiting for the

¹⁰⁷ “Media Jihad” in *The ISIS Reader*: p. 223.

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Brian Fishman, 2009, *Dysfunction and decline: Lessons learned from inside al-Qa’ida in Iraq*, West Point, New York: Combating Terrorism Center: 17. <https://ctc.usma.edu/dysfunction-and-decline-lessons-learned-from-inside-al-qaida-in-iraq/>

¹⁰⁹ For “Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State” (2007), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, “Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State”, *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 93-106.

¹¹⁰ “Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State” in *The ISIS Reader*: p.101.

¹¹¹ For the “Fallujah Memorandum” (2009), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, “The Fallujah Memorandum”, *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 107-145.

¹¹² “The Fallujah Memorandum”, *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: p. 115.

crusaders to achieve their plan's objective – that of establishing a loyal government – before implementing our Islamic State project is a weak strategy.”¹¹³ It goes on to argue: “There is no doubt in our mind that limiting jihad to military efforts alone is foolish.”¹¹⁴ Echoing the strategic mechanisms captured in Part I, deploying its system of control in an effort to render the coalition and Iraqi government's politico-military structures dysfunctional was seen as vital to winning over the population:

This strategy will prompt people to think that choosing such a government is not the right choice. It will also impact the crusaders, pushing them towards hopelessness, as all their hopes of establishing a strong government able to stand by itself are dashed. This will be because the *mujahidin* were able to infiltrate their security at a high level. They will lose their strong symbols, those capable of carrying on the crusaders' mission.¹¹⁵

Again, it is important to highlight that the Islamic State saw winning over “decisive minorities” *within* contested populations as essential because “the endorsement and contributions of some people will inspire loyalty in others, so that the public will become a part of the Islamic State of Iraq by protecting their own regions and expelling apostates.”¹¹⁶ For the Islamic State, a significant part of winning that deeper identity-based attitudinal support from not only “decisive minorities” but the broader population was to ensure that its system of meaning resonated by being complemented with actions. The authors of *The Fallujah Memorandum* warned, “this project might appear to be primarily a security model, but its ideological roots are most important. It will only be presented as a security model so that it will be more readily accepted and executed.”¹¹⁷

Hybrid-Conventional Military & Governance Activities

Most of the Islamic State's history has been spent oscillating through the early, pre-*tamkin* phases of its insurgency strategies and, expectedly, most of the selected publications focus on guerrilla war and governance issues.¹¹⁸ However, Uthmann bin abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi's “Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq”¹¹⁹ and “Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State”¹²⁰ are two documents, separated by almost a decade, that outline the Islamic State's approach to conventionalizing its military and governance efforts. These documents are not only separated by time but, in many respects, address subtly different stages in the conventionalization process. As Part III explores in more detail, the Islamic State of Iraq did not have the full-spectrum bureaucratic governance structures through 2006-07 as was seen in Mosul through 2014-17. In this respect, al-Tamimi's work offers slightly different strategic perspectives by focusing on securing complete *functional* dominance with *limited* bureaucratic implementation. In contrast, “Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State” mostly focuses on developing institutions to formalize functional dominance. At the heart of both is an important sentiment for this period of strategic transition: the merger of politico-military imperative, ideological compulsion, and jurisprudential justifications. According to the Islamic State, once territory and populations are under its control, whatever that may mean at any given time or location, its forces implement its system of control:

...filling the political vacuum is a Shari'ah requirement. It is an active role dictated by

¹¹³ Ibid p.122

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid p.129.

¹¹⁶ Ibid p.136

¹¹⁷ Ibid p.136.

¹¹⁸ It is important to acknowledge that while the Islamic State's doctrine provides the playbook, its implementation on the ground has evolved reflecting a range of factors including the group's leadership, strategic conditions, personnel, resources, and objectives.

¹¹⁹ Uthmann bin abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi, 2006/07, *Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq*, The Islamic State of Iraq's Ministry of Shari'ah Organization. The author wishes to thank Dr Craig Whiteside for the fully translated text.

¹²⁰ “Principles in the administration of the Islamic State”, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, December 7, 2015. <https://www.meforum.org/5700/islamic-state-master-plan>

the jihadist practice through the stages of its evolution. Its gradual operational and military success qualify this practice and impose it on the ground as one form of Shari'ah politics."¹²¹

The Hybrid Transition from Guerrilla Movement to State

The Islamic State movement's first "state", the "Islamic State of Iraq", was declared in October 2006 however it was largely a "state" in name only with a "government" that comprised of "informal" functions mostly absent of substantive institutions and bureaucracy. "Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq"¹²² articulates a full suite of governance functions and responsibilities for the new state while, at the same time, excusing it for not having established formal institutions around them. For example, a section devoted to responding to hypothetical critiques of the Islamic State of Iraq asserts: "They will say: 'Among the components of a state are institutions, administrative offices, and what is known as government services today. But the state that you announced does not offer anything like that, and does not enjoy the functions that we observe in other modern states!'"¹²³ The response to this hypothetical critique perfectly encapsulates the notion of an insurgency seeking to functionally out-govern a central authority, without formal institutions (i.e. structures), and simultaneously seeking to expose the state's structures as dysfunctional.

We would like to state that there is no evidence in the Shari'ah that requires adopting a specific type of organization or administration in establishing a growing Islamic State. The matter is referred to the people in charge of the state to select what is best for Muslims and what suits their situation including systems of administration, structure, and measures that carry out the work of the state and contribute to its expertise and energy to please Almighty God. Therefore, there is no need for emphasis on the official facilities of the Islamic state, which is no more than a dull media appearance, as is the case of the agent Iraqi government. It is apparent to everyone in the media that its instruments and administration are practically failing. On the contrary, the state of Mujahidin will be apparent with its facilities, but existing in space in touch with the people and interacting with their reality and needs.¹²⁴

This passage suggests that declaring a state was itself a powerful way to reinforce the group's ideology. It is clear the texts authors were conscious of the functional competition that its nascent proto-state would have to deal with: "The enemy tries to win over the people with construction projects and services, so as to achieve political gains in this field."¹²⁵

The mere existence of the state was seen as "propaganda of the deed" that legitimized the group's system of control and embodied its system of meaning: "Declaring the state will entail Islamic political weight, springing from a sincere jihadist experience established by the sons of Iraq themselves with their migrating brothers. Thus, the new state will gain a well-deserved historic legality, because of its struggle and fight against the invaders and the occupiers. This will create an Islamic axis, around which will gather the sons of the Muslims in Iraq."¹²⁶ In many ways, the Islamic State of Iraq was planting the seeds for future efforts to establish the caliphate and this work set the broad foundations for implementing a state for future opportunities when the threshold for *tamkin* has been sufficiently established. Overall, this text offered future generations of the movement justifications for limiting conventionalization while still leveraging the declaration that a "state" had been established.

¹²¹ *Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq*, p.65.

¹²² Uthmann bin abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi, 2006/07, *Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq*, The Islamic State of Iraq's Ministry of Shari'ah Organization. The author wishes to thank Dr Craig Whiteside for the fully translated text.

¹²³ Al-Tamimi, 2006/07, *Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq*, The Islamic State of Iraq's Ministry of Shari'ah Organization: p.66.

¹²⁴ Al-Tamimi, 2006/07, *Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq*, The Islamic State of Iraq's Ministry of Shari'ah Organization: p.66.

¹²⁵ *Ibid* p.65.

¹²⁶ *Ibid* p.49.

A Full-Spectrum, Bureaucratized, System of Control within a Propaganda State

Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State provides guidance on running the bureaucracies of a conventional state apparatus. The document opens by outlining the progression from administering camps to establishing and running an Islamic state, with most of its focus on the latter. It devotes a chapter to providing administrative guidance on a range of bureaucratic areas including the administration of the economy, education, “external relations” or foreign affairs, and the media.¹²⁷ One of the great challenges an insurgency faces when transitioning to conventional governance is the personnel, resource, and infrastructure costs associated with a necessarily “static” system of control to address the needs of a population. For the Islamic State, the capture of territory and cities also includes “all assets of advancement that does not suffice without the existence of an administration managing the interests and managing the crises.”¹²⁸ In other words, upon capturing cities the infrastructure and institutions (structures) are present but may not be functional. The document recommends: “preserving the capabilities [personnel and infrastructure] that managed the production projects under the prior governments, whilst taking into account the need to place strict oversights and an administration affiliated with the Islamic State.”¹²⁹ In other words, co-opt existing government institutions to expedite conventionalization. It goes on to suggest “placing specialists in accounting and oversight over all production directorates in the Islamic State.”¹³⁰ In many ways, this approach takes advantage of the Islamic State’s adhocratic organizational traits by deploying its personnel to parasitically takeover the institutions and manage its existing personnel. Co-option is designed to smooth what is a disruptive period of transition and ensure its system of control is efficiently bureaucratized.

Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State also provides clear guidance on the “administration of media” essentially to establish a *propaganda state* calibrated to ingrain the group’s system of meaning into the population. Like its system of control, the Islamic State’s propaganda apparatus is similarly centralized and bureaucratized via the “Base Foundation” to ensure a coherence of messaging across its “provincial media” and “auxiliary agencies and foundations.”¹³¹ Provincial media offices had to coordinate with the “Governor”, military/security, and the Base Foundation. Meanwhile, the Base Foundation was “directly affiliated” with the Office of the Caliph or the Advisory Council while the leading media official “should be connected by his relations with the military commander, [chief] security official and the Caliph himself.”¹³² The guidance for messaging was that it focused on military operations, services, *shari’a* rulings, and day-to-day life.¹³³ It seems clear that a central component of the Islamic State controlling a city was the full and coordinated implementation of its system of control *and* meaning. The Islamic State’s approach to being a proto-state calls for the implementation of a full spectrum, normative governance apparatus within a propaganda state.

Final Remarks

The central dilemma facing an insurgency is how to defeat a conventionally stronger and resource superior adversary in a politico-military contest to win the support of populations and control territory and resources. Despite the extraordinary technological advancements of the last century, the fundamentals of modern insurgency have remained relatively constant.

¹²⁷ “Principles in the administration of the Islamic State”, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, December 7, 2015. <https://www.meforum.org/5700/islamic-state-master-plan>

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² “Principles in the administration of the Islamic State”, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, December 7, 2015. <https://www.meforum.org/5700/islamic-state-master-plan>

¹³³ “Principles in the administration of the Islamic State”, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, December 7, 2015. <https://www.meforum.org/5700/islamic-state-master-plan>

Indeed, there is little in the Islamic State’s insurgency doctrine that would not be recognized by seminal insurgency thinkers such as Mao, Guevara, or al-Muqrin. While this analysis has necessarily been broad and brief, as summarized in Table 3, the fourteen texts that constitute the “core” of the Islamic State’s insurgency canon reflects the conceptual framework established in Part I. Understanding how the Islamic State theorizes about its insurgency activities is vital for the insights it provides into the strategic and intellectual culture within its organization. More importantly for the purposes of this study, Part II clearly establishes the basic doctrinal guidelines for the Islamic State’s method of insurgency which, in turn, helps to inform the analysis of its practice in Part III.

Table 3: Ten Point Insurgency Model & the Islamic State’s insurgency canon

Insurgency Framework	Addressed in the following Islamic State primary sources
Implement a <i>competitive system of control</i> via politico-military activities and a <i>competitive system of meaning</i> via propaganda and other influence activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>From Hijrah to Khilafah</i> ▪ <i>Zarqawi’s Letter to Al-Qaida Leadership</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i>
Transition through campaign phases characterized by guerrilla military and governance activities in its early stages and more hybrid/conventional activities based on relative strengths and vulnerabilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>From Hijrah to Khilafah</i> ▪ <i>That They Live By Proof</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> ▪ <i>Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the mujahideen (Parts 1-4)</i> ▪ <i>Unless swerving (as a strategy) for war or joining (another) company</i> ▪ <i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i> ▪ <i>Principles in the administration of the Islamic State</i>
Balance military, propaganda, functional, and structural activities throughout the campaign phases focused on three key goals: achieve functional advantage, impose a functional disadvantage on adversaries, and deploy propaganda as a force multiplier/nullifier.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Media Operative, You are also a Mujahid</i> ▪ <i>Analysis of the State of ISI</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> ▪ <i>Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State</i> ▪ <i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i>
Engage in both top-down political activities designed to coerce/recruit established authorities and bottom-up governance activities to win the support of contested populations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Analysis of the State of ISI</i> ▪ <i>Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State</i> ▪ <i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i>
Centralize propaganda to as a force multiplier/nullifier and to project a competitive system of meaning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Media Operative, You are also a Mujahid</i> ▪ <i>Zarqawi’s Letter to Al-Qaida Leadership</i>
Target supportive “decisive minorities” for alliance building and recruitment while intimidating or killing oppositional “decisive minorities”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Analysis of the State of ISI</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> ▪ <i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i>
Build momentum for the campaign through efforts that have cumulative, cyclical, reinforcing effects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>From Hijrah to Khilafah</i> ▪ <i>Zarqawi’s Letter to Al-Qaida Leadership</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> ▪ <i>Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State</i> ▪ <i>Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the mujahideen (Parts 1-4)</i>
Co-opt established government institutions to expedite transitions up campaign phases towards greater conventionality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Principles in the administration of the Islamic State</i>
Rationalize to expedite transitions down phases towards great unconventionality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>That They Live By Proof</i> ▪ <i>Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the mujahideen (Parts 1-4)</i> ▪ <i>Unless swerving (as a strategy) for war or joining (another) company</i>
Gauge successes and failures by standards relative to both the campaign phase at the time and the adversary’s strengths and weaknesses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>That They Live By Proof</i> ▪ <i>Zarqawi’s Letter to Al-Qaida Leadership</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> ▪ <i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i>

Part III: The Islamic State's long jihad

“This followed a shift in the Islamic State’s strategy, which now saw its forces leaving their desert strongholds in Iraq and making their way into the cities. Since the start of the jihad in 2003, the province of Al-Anbar has traditionally been the stronghold of the mujahidin, with Fallujah serving as its jihadi capital. In spite of the advantage of having a strong power base, the Islamic State understood that having just a single power base in any given region would work against them by giving their enemies a point of focus for their strikes.”

Excerpt from Islamic State Report #3, 2014.

Part III broadly examines the Islamic State’s method of insurgency in practice. It begins with the group’s operations under the leadership of its founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi from 2004 to its capture of Mosul in 2014 and the years of its occupation. Much of this history is characterized by its deployment of guerrilla warfare and governance activities to implement its system of control and project a powerful system of meaning. This analysis particularly focuses on the strategy outlined in the *Fallujah Memorandum* and the operations leading to the fall of Mosul and the group’s transformation into a conventional/hybrid politico-military force. The Islamic State’s transformation from unconventional guerrilla operations into a conventional “state” was the result of it applying the strategic principles articulated in its insurgency canon. Part III then briefly examines the Islamic State’s governance efforts in Mosul arguing that it implemented a full spectrum, normative, competitive system of control coupled with an all-encompassing propaganda apparatus. Indeed, the Islamic State’s government departments in Mosul were designed to not only control the population and resources but ingrain and reinforce its system of meaning. This analysis also highlights the way ideological, strategic, and organizational forces within the Islamic State movement have created synchronicities and tensions that may derail as much as fuel the group’s trajectory towards securing territories and controlling populations.

The Road to Mosul

The history of the Islamic State can be divided into four periods that are distinguished by not only certain strategic, organizational, leadership, and historical traits but several name changes.¹³⁴ The first period, spanning from the 1990s to 2006, is characterized by the leadership of the movement’s founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. During this period, the group largely operated under the name *Jama’at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* until 2004 when it rebranded as *al-Qa’ida in the Land of the Two Rivers* or *al-Qa’ida in Iraq*. The second period stretches from October 2006, with the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq, through to 2011. During this period, the group was led by Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (known as “the Two Sheikhs”) and then, after their deaths in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The third period covers 2011-2016 and is characterized by the group’s transnational expansion, beginning with its spread from Iraq into Syria, and establishment of its caliphate in 2014. Conventionally speaking, this is by far the peak of the movement’s conventional success. The fourth period, however, is defined by decline and its regression to guerrilla war and governance operations but, this time, with global affiliates dotted across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.¹³⁵

Throughout this history, a suite of core strategic principles, those analysed in Part II of this study, have remained largely constant. However, the operational and tactical nuances of how best to time and apply them has necessarily evolved based on the unique requirements of the

¹³⁴ For more see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, Charlie Winter, 2020, “Lessons from the Islamic State’s ‘Milestone’ Texts and Speeches”, *CTC Sentinel*, January 2020. <https://ctc.usma.edu/lessons-islamic-states-milestone-texts-speeches/>

¹³⁵ For more see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, Charlie Winter, 2020, “The Islamic State’s Global Insurgency and its Counterstrategy Implications”, *International Center for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, Vol. 2, November 2020: pp.21-46. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/11/Special-Edition-2-2.pdf>

time and those hard learned lessons in war. The most intensive periods of review and development came during those pivotal moments of strategic transition either “up” its campaign phases towards greater conventionality or “down” towards more unconventional politico-military activities. Indeed, the most intensive critical reflection and re-assessment have come during the times between those four key historical periods when the realities of war, governance, and propaganda *practice* reshaped and refined the nuances of its *doctrinal thinking*. Naturally, it was during those times of greatest decline that the deepest reflections occurred, most significantly after 2007 when the Islamic State of Iraq was destroyed, reflected in the ‘lessons learned’ document¹³⁶ and the *Fallujah Memorandum*.¹³⁷ The Islamic State is an organization that has demonstrated a surprising willingness to critically evaluate its thinking and practice. To understand how the Islamic State’s application of its approach to insurgency enabled it to capture and control Mosul, it is vital to consider several steep learning curves that fundamentally shaped the movement’s trajectory.

Zarqawi’s War

One may be tempted to see the Islamic State movement’s proto-state project as an abstract aspiration for the group until after Zarqawi’s death and the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006. However, according to the reflections of Sayf al-Adel in *My Experiences with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi*, the young Jordanian’s camps in Afghanistan in the late 1990s were “building a minimized Islamic community”¹³⁸ with military and educational programs al-Adel exclaims “I thought was brilliant at the time, because the educational program focused on the [group] structure and on memorizing the holy Quran and studying history and geography.”¹³⁹ Al-Adel goes on to say that with each visit to the camps he noticed improvements in the “organizational, management and military abilities of the young men.”¹⁴⁰ This underscores an important trend across the Islamic State movement’s history in which its sharia and government system is applied wherever possible. It is a standard reinforced in *Principles in the administration of the Islamic State* whereby establishing and organizing camps is seen as part of a process towards administering a state.¹⁴¹ In short, establishing an Islamic state is never merely an abstraction used for rhetorical purposes for the Islamic State movement, but a constant form of practice scaled to opportunity.

It is with the ultimate goal of establishing a state that Zarqawi launched his bloody campaign in Iraq, at first clandestinely in 2003 with initially unclaimed mass casualty attacks. His campaign would apply many of the principles that became trademarks of the movement’s guerrilla warfare practices. According to Zarqawi’s letter to al-Qaida leaders, he had engaged in dozens of attacks for months without claiming responsibility explaining: “What has prevented us from going public is that we have been waiting until we have weight on the ground and finish preparing integrated structures capable of bearing a reversal.”¹⁴² This reflects a deep appreciation for carefully timed and decisive actions designed to exploit opportunities and leverage perceptions of crisis in the population, especially Iraq’s Sunni population. Attacking Iraq’s Shia population was crucial to Zarqawi’s strategy as he reckoned that “If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans.”¹⁴³ Attacks on the U.S. led Coalition were designed to plunge Iraq into

¹³⁶ Unknown author, “Analysis of the State of ISI” (NMEC-2007-612449), *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*. <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/analysis-of-the-state-of-isi-original-language-2/>

¹³⁷ For the “Fallujah Memorandum” (2009), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, “The Fallujah Memorandum”, *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 107-145.

¹³⁸ Sayf al-Adel, *My experiences with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi*: 10.

¹³⁹ Ibid p.9.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid p.10.

¹⁴¹ “Principles in the administration of the Islamic State”, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, December 7, 2015. <https://www.meforum.org/5700/islamic-state-master-plan>

¹⁴² “Zarqawi’s Strategy” (2004), *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: p. 44.

¹⁴³ Ibid p.45.

a triangular war that left Sunni populations with no choice but to support, however reluctantly, Zarqawi's group. He recognized that propaganda would need to play a central role in these efforts to amplify the group's actions and provide a lens through which its target audiences would perceive the conflict.¹⁴⁴

In this triangular war Zarqawi's great fear, later shared by successive generations of the movement he founded, was of losing the support of its Sunni constituents to rivals: "How can we fight their cousins and their sons and under what pretext after the Americans, who hold the reins of power from their rear bases, pull back?"¹⁴⁵ In the coming months and years, Zarqawi implemented his plans almost exactly as outlined in his letter. Suicide operations became a trademark of his campaign, powerful examples of "propaganda of the deed", augmented by a rural and urban guerrilla war. This was all part of a process that would see his group look to "gain control of the land at night, and extend it into daylight."¹⁴⁶ His organization, imbued with adhoc traits, was custom made for this type of conflict. As Dexter Filkins asserts in *Once upon a time in Iraq*:

Zarqawi is the most bloodthirsty psychopath but, man, he knew how to run a group like al-Qaida. He setup kind of this perfect organism, very few people knew, who were in al-Qaida, knew other people that were in al-Qaida. You could kill individual parts of it but the rest of it would just continue. And he turned this thing loose, this perfect organism, on Iraq and it was just this gigantic killing machine.¹⁴⁷

Zarqawi's media profile also helped to attract foreign fighters to his ranks. While the number of foreign fighters in this iteration of the group would later be dwarfed by the wave of foreign fighters that flowed a decade later, foreigners proved a vital source of revenue and a propaganda boon. As Zarqawi declared, "there is no real jihad in Iraq except with the presence of the *muhajirin* [migrants]." Zarqawi would not survive to see the fulfilment of his dream to establish an Islamic State, nor the even greater challenges the movement he founded would need to confront.

The Rise & Fall of the Islamic State of Iraq

One of the great challenges facing an insurgency during times of success is when and how to transition, both strategically and organizationally, from guerrilla operations to hybrid/conventional military and governance activities. Since its move from Afghanistan to Iraq, the group Zarqawi had founded had enjoyed rapid successes in the field rising from a small peripheral player in Iraq's heterogenous resistance to arguably the most influential of the Sunni jihadis. Its justification for declaring the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006 was based on these successes and, therefore, the necessity of formalizing its control in key Sunni areas. As al-Tamimi declares in *Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq*:

After more than three years of jihad in Iraq, and with help from God, the mujahidin were able to reach a suitable level of capability and organization in military, administrative, economic, and media fields. They have reached a level, which they have not reached before; that is a gift from God to them and a historic opportunity, which they must exploit and invest in performing the most important Islamic duties in this age by establishing the anticipated Islamic state. The Islamic State represents a great vital framework.¹⁴⁸

Furthermore, by declaring its state, the Islamic State of Iraq, as the group now called itself, was seeking to leverage an apparent jurisprudential obligation that Muslims are compelled to

¹⁴⁴ Ibid p.48.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid p.47.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid p.48.

¹⁴⁷ BBC, 2020, "Episode 3: Fallujah", *Once Upon a Time in Iraq* (Series 1). Available online: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p08kr4ws/once-upon-a-time-in-iraq-series-1-3-fallujah>

¹⁴⁸ al-Tamimi, 2006/07, *Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq*, p.37.

join and support an Islamic government. In its calculations, declaring its own state would also make the Iraqi government “appear naked and deprived of all legality and credibility, without help or support from any of the sons of Muslims. It will quickly melt away in front of the bright lights of the blessed Islamic State.”¹⁴⁹ Through the lens of the insurgency model outlined in Part I, the act of declaring a state was itself a structure of sorts, an institution meant to symbolize authority and control, which the Islamic State of Iraq established to practically and symbolically contest the Iraqi government.

To these ends, the Islamic State of Iraq made efforts to present itself as a genuine state. For example, months after its declaration, the Islamic State of Iraq announced that it had appointed ministers for oil, agriculture, fisheries, and health amongst other portfolios.¹⁵⁰ Yet it remained a “state” largely in name only with limited control over most of its claimed territories and very few actual institutions to formalize its functional governance efforts. This is not to say that the Islamic State of Iraq was completely dysfunctional. In fact, it had established a strong underground economy, especially in Nineveh, where it generated funds through “taxation” of people and businesses as well as criminal activities.¹⁵¹ Overall, the Islamic State of Iraq implemented a very coercion-centric system of government that, by its own admission, largely focused on security, rule of law, and justice *functions*.¹⁵² For example, just as Zarqawi used suicide operations as “propaganda of the deed”, the Islamic State of Iraq’s ruthless implementation of punishments for breaking its laws had the same purpose:

Those whose minds are polluted with the poison of the modern paganism, and whose hearts were pierced with the arrows of westernization, think that carrying out the mandatory punishments is barbaric, backward, and a reason for the international community to be angry with them and to expose them to the ghosts of siege and boycotts. Here is the test to show the reality of men.¹⁵³

Ultimately, the Islamic State of Iraq project failed, and proof of its failure is evident in the fact that it would be predominantly Iraq’s Sunnis, its own constituents, that would play a central role in its collapse. In Anbar Province, it would largely be a combination of the Sunni Awakenings and the Surge of U.S. forces that would defeat it. In Nineveh province, Iraqi counterterrorism operations and local civil society played a central role in undermining the Islamic State of Iraq’s presence. In many respects, the Islamic State of Iraq faced the worst-case scenario for an insurgency at this time with key Sunni tribes, which are highly influential “decisive minorities” in this context, turning against the group and joining the *Sahwa* (Awakening) forces which acted as a powerful catalyst for broader Sunni communities to turn against it. Indeed, it proved an even more devastating period for the group as the pressures of rapid decline resulted in hundreds of its members being killed or captured while its leadership ranks were hollowed by counterterrorism operations and treachery within its ranks.¹⁵⁴

The Forgotten Years

On the precipice of total decimation, the Islamic State of Iraq pivoted to a strategy of survival then the slow process of rebuilding under the leadership of “the two sheikhs”, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. Indeed, this period of the Islamic State movement’s history, from about 2007-08 to 2011-12, maybe one of the most understudied in its history

¹⁴⁹ Ibid p.65.

¹⁵⁰ Nelly Lahoud, “Metamorphosis: From al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad to Dawlat al-Khilafa (2003–2014),” in *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State*, Combating Terrorism Center, December 2014.

¹⁵¹ Johnston, Patrick, Shapiro, Jacob, Shatz, Howard, Bahney, Benjamin, Jung, Danielle, Ryan, Patrick, Wallace, Jonathan, 2016, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005-2010*, RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1192.html

¹⁵² For more on AQI’s brutal system of control during this period and how it contributed to the Sunni Awakening and the success of the surge see Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, 115-185.

¹⁵³ Al-Tammimi, 2006/07, p.57.

¹⁵⁴ Haroro J. Ingram, Omar Mohammed, 2020, “The Head of ISIS Is a Hypocrite and a Traitor”, *Foreign Policy*, November 19, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/19/isis-islamic-state-leader-hypocrite-traitor-mawla-quraishi/>

but is arguably one of the most revered inside the group. Two factors were crucial to the Islamic State movement's survival and revival during this period. One, the surprising frankness with which the group assessed its own failings and the methodical approach it took to developing and implementing a strategy of revival. Two, the withdrawal of U.S. forces supporting Iraq's government was seen by the group as the reprieve it needed. The Islamic State of Iraq planned its comeback accordingly. This is clear in both *Analysis of the state of the ISI*¹⁵⁵ and the *Fallujah Memorandum*.¹⁵⁶

The architects of the Islamic State of Iraq's revival strategy assessed "that the next war will be primarily a political and a media war."¹⁵⁷ Without the resources to push for a full spectrum system of control, it focussed its efforts on functionally reaching into communities with informal governance initiatives especially aimed at winning over "decisive minorities" in Iraq's Sunni populations. Indeed, having just been defeated by Sunni *sahwa* (Awakening) units, the group resolved that,

we, the Islamic State, call for establishment of [our own] jihadi *sahwa* [awakening] councils, similar to the ones the Prophet – peace be upon him – convened at the Medina delegations. The idea is to cooperate with righteous and honourable tribal leaders to develop security forces from among their youth to protect their regions from traitor police and the crusaders' forces and to completely cleanse the region.¹⁵⁸

The intent was for these *sahwa* councils to support the Islamic State in its informal functional governance efforts, "these forces will protect people from theft and mercenaries and impose sharia rules."¹⁵⁹

Of course, violence played an important role in the Islamic State of Iraq's plans. With its military capabilities limited, it focused on maximizing the impact of its military operations by targeting the Iraqi security services and those influential members of local communities that allied with its rivals. The strategy is encapsulated in the phrase: "For every ten bullets, nine should be directed toward the apostates and one toward the crusaders."¹⁶⁰ The guerrilla warfare principle of exhaustion and *nikaya* applied to Iraqi security forces and local rivals proved vital for simultaneously weakening the central government's security capabilities, hamstringing its abilities to govern, and nullifying the influence of those decisive minorities that supported its adversaries. This was a strategy based on patience and, over time, creating the conditions that better suited the Islamic State movement rather than its adversaries. The propaganda efforts needed to support this revival strategy acknowledged the need for the group to "diversify our speech and messages to differentiate between different people, depending on their orientations and ideologies".¹⁶¹ In other words, develop and deploy more nuanced propaganda to achieve better reach and impact. These broad pillars – an emphasis on political and media activities, empowering "decisive minorities" that are friendly while "cleansing" those actors that are not, and *functionally* filling voids left by weak and distracted central authorities – constituted the key lessons to emerge from failure and the crucial paths to future success. It was this combination of activities which, over time, built momentum behind the group's campaign to capture territory and control populations again.

¹⁵⁵ Unknown author, "Analysis of the State of ISI" (NMEC-2007-612449), *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*. <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/analysis-of-the-state-of-isi-original-language-2/>

¹⁵⁶ For the "Fallujah Memorandum" (2009), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, "The Fallujah Memorandum", *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 107-145.

¹⁵⁷ "The Fallujah Memorandum", *The ISIS Reader*, p.115.

¹⁵⁸ "The Fallujah Memorandum", *The ISIS Reader*, p.135.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁰ Craig Whiteside, 2018, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006-2017)", ICCT-The Hague, September 2018.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*. 127.

Path to the Caliphate

With the killing of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emerged as leader of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2010. At least with hindsight, the stage was set for an extraordinary period of success having patiently spent years rebuilding and then laying the foundations for a possible resurgence with a steady operational tempo. For example, despite being significantly weakened, the group was able to largely maintain its operational activities and tempo in Iraq for over a decade with only two significant declines in its annual rate of operations in 2006 and 2011.¹⁶² The group was now poised to exploit opportunities to start to build momentum behind a reinvigorated campaign to push beyond the *tamkin* threshold. The Arab Spring sweeping through neighbouring Syria in early-2011 and the withdrawal of U.S. forces by the end of that same year would prove to be precisely the opportunities the Islamic State of Iraq needed. Indeed, from 2011, Islamic State operations increased exponentially,¹⁶³ also accounting for its commencement of operations in Syria during this period, with the group alleging to have engaged in over 19,000 operations between November 2011 and May 2014.¹⁶⁴ When Baghdadi declared in April 2013 that the Islamic State of Iraq was now to be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) signalling its formal expansion into neighbouring Syria, it would soon become clear that this was more than bluster for the sake of propaganda and challenging al-Qaida.¹⁶⁵

Through the remainder of 2013 and into 2014, ISIS escalated its campaign across Syria and Iraq. From targeted assassinations and small guerrilla attacks, ISIS expanded and diversified its military actions deploying a range of combat operations from terrorism (e.g. suicide and car bombings) and guerrilla warfare tactics (e.g. hit-and-run tactics, ambushes and sabotage) to increasingly more conventional operations as it reached force symmetry with rivals (e.g. use of artillery and armoured vehicles).¹⁶⁶ As part of this period of transition, it regularly fused conventional and unconventional combat in its operations while, in other locations where adversaries were stronger, resorting to predominantly guerrilla operations. Throughout the history of the Islamic State movement, the group has demonstrated a willingness to engage in different types of military and governance activities dependent on the specific conditions in the area of operations. It is important to highlight that between announcing the name change to ISIS in April 2013 and its capture of Mosul in June 2014, the group had significant setbacks. Most notably, late-December 2013 and early January 2014 was a difficult period for ISIS with military defeats in both Syria, with rebel factions uniting to drive them eastward, and Iraq with Sunni tribes around Ramadi and government forces near Samarra pushing it westward. However, it would ultimately use the pincer movement of its adversaries as an opportunity to consolidate its forces, secure the territories around the Syria-Iraq border, and launch counteroffensives that paved the way for the most successful period in the Islamic State movement's history.¹⁶⁷

In the years leading to its capture of Mosul, ISIS engaged in dozens of campaigns but its "Breaking the Walls" and "Harvesting" campaigns were especially crucial in laying the

¹⁶² For more see Daniel Milton, 'The Islamic State: An adaptive organization facing increasing challenges', in *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State*, Combating Terrorism Center, December 2014.42-43.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Daniel Milton, 'Goal and Methods: Comparing Three Militant Groups', in *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State*, Combating Terrorism Center, December 2014. pp.27-35.

¹⁶⁵ Ingram, Whiteside, Winter, 2020, "The declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (2013)", pp.149-160, in *The ISIS Reader*, Oxford University Press: New York.

¹⁶⁶ During this period, the hybrid approach to warfare adopted by the Islamic State was a regular feature in its propaganda campaign. For example, *Flames of War* showed ISIS militants involved in suicide bombing attacks, guerrilla raids and conventional artillery barrages (see Al Hayat Media, *Flames of War*, video). An earlier video, *Clanging of Swords, Part 4* (Arabic narration) also shows the group engaged in a variety of operations from more conventional light infantry maneuvering to assassinations and IED attacks on US-equipped Iraqi military targets (Al-Furqan Media, *Clanging of Swords, Part 4*, video).

¹⁶⁷ This period in the Islamic State movement's history is clearly significant for within the group. *Flames of War* identifies '2nd of Rabi' Al-Awwal' (3 January 2014) as a 'Black Day' in its history when its opponents 'united' to attack it. As the narrator states: "The various deviant groups were united in their enmity towards the Islamic State as they undertook a full-fledged, coordinated and multi-pronged assault against its fighters and their families" (Al Hayat Media, *Flames of War*, video).

foundations for its victory in June 2014 and have since become global rallying cries for action. Beginning with “Breaking the Walls”¹⁶⁸ in July 2012, this year-long campaign focussed on consolidating manpower – by attacking prisons and releasing inmates who would join its ranks – and territory – by securing its areas of control.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, when its “Breaking the Walls” campaign climaxed with its raid on Abu Ghraib prison, this signalled the commencement of its “Soldier’s Harvest”¹⁷⁰ campaign (July 2013 – June 2014) which, as the name suggests, focussed predominantly on attacking Iraqi government security force members.¹⁷¹ Specifically targeting the security sector and local government officials via *nikayah* operations was designed to not only deplete and stretch enemy capabilities but demoralize them. As Milton asserts:

...the steepest inclines [in operations] came in the three areas in Iraq where the IS [the Islamic State] would eventually conduct its most serious fight for territory: Ninawa, al-Anbar, and Salah al-Din and Northern Baghdad. In hindsight, these attacks were most likely strategically planned moves to prepare the battlefield for future operations. In particular, a number of these attacks appear to have been specially designed to not just inflict military damage, but also to spread psychological fear among the population, especially security forces employed by the Iraqi government, in preparation for future operations.¹⁷²

However, military force was not always the blunt “point-man” of the Islamic State’s system of control and it often deployed guerrilla governance activities (e.g. taxation and law enforcement) along with propaganda to establish its presence in an area *before* launching sustained military attacks. These functional governance activities would then be formalised with the establishment of structures when it had sufficient control of that territory. This trend is best evidenced by reports that the Islamic State was “generating nearly \$12million per month in revenues through extortion and smuggling rackets”¹⁷³ for a year *prior* to its capture of Mosul in June 2014. Such efforts were designed to achieve functional dominance to both disconnect the population from incumbent authorities and implement its own covert system of control. This quest for functional dominance also acted as a mechanism for the Islamic State to strengthen its relationships with local populations, especially tribes,¹⁷⁴ and gather intelligence that would enable them to appropriate pre-existing governance structures (e.g. buildings and infrastructure) and functions (e.g. mediatory bodies) for themselves when control of that territory was secured. These activities helped to create the perception that ISIS was a capable authority developing practical solutions to fill the political and governance voids (which it had helped to exacerbate if not create) *before* it had formalised its presence with its own governance institutions. Indeed, during the leadership of the two Baghdadis, the Islamic State’s political and governance apparatus became increasingly sophisticated and bureaucratized. Centralized command with decentralized management and execution, typically via provincial and lower-level leaders, proved essential in how the group governed territory and populations especially as its forces spread out over more territory and had to manage larger populations.

In the months prior to Mosul’s capture, it is important to acknowledge that the Islamic State was engaged in a variety of governance activities across Syria and Iraq through early-2014. From a security and law enforcement perspective, its forces were deployed to secure the

¹⁶⁸ A military campaign attacking prisons to release inmates who then join the group.

¹⁶⁹ See Lewis, ‘Al Qaeda in Iraq’s ‘Breaking the Walls’ Campaign’, online; Milton, ‘The Islamic State’, 37-38.

¹⁷⁰ A military campaign focused on attacking the central authority’s security personnel.

¹⁷¹ For more see Lewis, ‘AQI’s ‘Soldier’s Harvest’ Campaign’, online; Knights, ‘ISIL’s Political-Military Power in Iraq’, 2.

¹⁷² Milton, ‘The Islamic State’, 38-39.

¹⁷³ Brett McGurk, 2014, “Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing: Iraq at a Crossroads: Options for U.S. Policy (July 24, 2014)”, *Statement for the Record: Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk*.
<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/McGurk%20Testimony%20072414-Final%20Version%20REVISED.pdf>

¹⁷⁴ Islamic State’s rebuilding of relationships with Sunni tribes that had participated in the “Sunni Awakening” (*sahawat*) became a prominent feature in its propaganda campaigns (e.g. Al Hayat Media, *Islamic State News*, 6).

population,¹⁷⁵ implement laws to regulate civil and economic activities,¹⁷⁶ and establish regulatory bodies responsible for enforcement but also mediation in the case of disputations such as policing¹⁷⁷ and judicial functions¹⁷⁸. The group's regulation of economic activities was another crucial mechanism for exerting control over contested populations. The fundamentals of its financial administration – i.e. largely self-funded with diverse revenue streams – have remained largely constant changing in scope rather than substance during this time.¹⁷⁹ While foreign fighters reportedly provided most of the group's funding during Zarqawi's reign,¹⁸⁰ the group engaged in more varied revenue streams from oil sales, loot and ransoms, "taxation" from populations living in its areas of control, and foreign donations.¹⁸¹ As Johnston asserts,

ISIL [the Islamic State] and its predecessors have long generated the vast majority of the group's funding internally. ISIL reportedly raises the majority of its money now through smuggling oil and products originating in the Iraqi and Syrian oil sectors or through extorting entities in those sectors; through extortion and taxation of the local economy in the areas it controls; through looting war spoils, including the region's rare and valuable antiquities; and through black-market sales of stolen and looted goods.¹⁸²

With its control of major cities like Raqqa in January 2014, the Islamic State looked to reshape the economic system by minting its own currency,¹⁸³ supporting the agriculture sector,¹⁸⁴ re-opening markets and trade,¹⁸⁵ establishing a consumer protection office,¹⁸⁶ and the provision of salaries to its fighters and civil servants.

Perhaps the most significant shift for the Islamic State movement at this time was the prominence of its propaganda apparatus. The Islamic State's insurgency writings had always stressed the importance of propaganda as a mechanism to amplify the effects of its politico-military activities and win populations over to its cause. While the group's practice had reflected this prioritization, the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Furqan and Abu Muhammad al-Adnani arguably made the Islamic State's propaganda apparatus the most impressive of any insurgency in history.¹⁸⁷ As Abdul Nasser Qardash, a senior leader in the Islamic State, explained: "The media is our most important weapon."¹⁸⁸ Indeed, Qardash ties the Islamic State's recruitment and politico-military successes through this period to the fact that "the Islamic State had adopted an advanced media strategy that was more expensive and

¹⁷⁵ E.g. see Al Hayat Media, 'Gates of Al-Khair Reached', 2; Al Hayat Media, 'The Liberation of Biji', 32-33.

¹⁷⁶ E.g. see Al Hayat Media, 'Implementing the Hudud', 2; Al Hayat Media, 'Community shows support for Hadd', *Islamic State News* (Issue 3), 2014: 4.

¹⁷⁷ E.g. see Al Hayat Media, 'On the Beat', 5; Kirkuk Information Office, 'صور من المعهد الشرعي في ولاية كركوك' [Photo report of Forensic Office in Kirkuk], online.

¹⁷⁸ For example see Al Hayat Media, 'Da'wah and Hisbah in the Islamic State', 16-17; Aleppo Information Office, 'إقامة حدّ القتل على سبّ رسول الله' [Order of execution for insulting the Prophet], online; Kirkuk Information Office, 'مصادرة وحرق كمية من السجائر' [Confiscation and destruction of cigarettes], online; Al Hayat Media, 'Highway Robbers Executed', 45.

¹⁷⁹ As Johnston asserts, 'the key difference between the financial activities of ISIL's predecessors and the financial activities of ISIL now is not in kind but rather in scale' (Johnston, 'Countering ISIL's Finances', 2). He goes on to assert that while IS was estimated to generate \$1-3 million per day in 2014, '...ISIL's master financial ledgers in Mosul show that the group made an average of slightly less than \$1 million per month between August 2008 and January 2009' (Johnston, 'Countering ISIL's Finances', 2).

¹⁸⁰ For more see Bahney, et al, 'An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq', online; Milton, 'The Islamic State', 56-57.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 56-53; also see Lakshmanan, 'Islamic State now resembles the Taliban with oil fields', online; Johnston, 'Countering ISIL's Financing', online.

¹⁸² Johnston, 'Countering ISIL's Financing', 2.

¹⁸³ Al Hayat Media, 'The Currency of the Khilafah', 18-19.

¹⁸⁴ Al Hayat Media, 'Islamic State provides security to farmers', 5.

¹⁸⁵ Al Hayat Media, 'Fresh produce injects life into Halab market', *Islamic State News* (Issue 2), 2014: 1; Al Hayat Media, 'Mujatweet Episode 7 A Snapshot of Life under the Islamic State', video; Ninevah Office, 'صور من سوق السمك في مدينة الموصل' [Photo report of fish market in Mosul], 2015.

¹⁸⁶ Al Hayat Media, 'On patrol with the office of consumer protection', 4-5; Al Hayat Media, 'Interview with Abu Muhammad (AM), Head of the Consumer Complaints Division', 6; Al Hayat Media, 'Al Hayat Media Center Presents – Mujatweets 3 – FetaFeat in Raqqah', video.

¹⁸⁷ In May 2021, the Islamic State's *al-Naba* newsletter published a two-part biography of Abu Muhammad al-Furqan. See Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 2021, "The life of Abu Muhammad al-Furqan: Head of the media Department of the Islamic State (Part One)" available here: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2021/05/the-life-of-abu-muhammad-al-furqan-head-of>; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 2021, "The life of Abu Muhammad al-Furqan: Head of the media Department of the Islamic State (Part Two)" available here: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2021/05/the-life-of-abu-muhammad-al-furqan-head-of-1>

¹⁸⁸ Al-Hashimi, "Interview: ISIS's Abdul Nasser Qardash", p11.

professional and got faster in publishing and disseminating.”¹⁸⁹ Its various media centres exploited all available communication mediums to promote its system of control highlighting local stories of how it had provided gas canisters to needy citizens,¹⁹⁰ redistributed surplus wheat from a successful harvest¹⁹¹ and given cash handouts to the poor¹⁹² then disseminated it to global audiences. The Islamic State also continued to promote the fact that, despite now controlling major cities in Iraq and Syria, it was continuing its war:

It [the Islamic State] continues to cater to the daily needs of its citizens in both regions [Syria and Iraq] even as it makes steady gains against both Iranian-backed regimes, crushes both American-backed sawah initiatives, and guards against any possible Peshmerga and PKK advances on both the Iraqi and Syrian “Kurdistan” fronts.¹⁹³

The Islamic State’s propagandists were keen to flaunt how its system of governance was now providing what central authorities had failed to do for years by establishing educational institutions¹⁹⁴, running hospitals,¹⁹⁵ maintaining infrastructure in its areas of control,¹⁹⁶ and even reportedly issuing parking tickets.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, by taking over pre-existing infrastructure (e.g. electricity production, hospitals, government offices) and even former staff, the Islamic State eased the transition to its authority and instilled a sense of stability – reinforced by the promise of brutal punishment for dissent – within its areas of control. It is with these broad dynamics in mind that this study now turns to its occupation of Mosul.

The Islamic State’s occupation of Mosul

When the Islamic State captured Mosul in June 2014, it used the opportunity to highlight the insurgency strategy that had led to this achievement:

This past Monday, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham liberated the city of Mosul in its entirety.... This followed a shift in the Islamic State’s strategy, which now saw its forces leaving their desert strongholds in Iraq and making their way into the cities. Since the start of the jihad in 2003, the province of Al-Anbar has traditionally been the stronghold of the mujahidin, with Fallujah serving as its jihadi capital. In spite of the advantage of having a strong power base, the Islamic State understood that having just a single power base in any given region would work against them by giving their enemies a point of focus for their strikes.¹⁹⁸

This statement encapsulates many of the key principles outlined earlier. Most notably, engaging in a long-term campaign of guerrilla operations, thus delaying the static control of territory, until conditions are appropriate to transition towards greater conventionality. By June 10, 2014, the Islamic State controlled Mosul and it immediately began to establish institutions and bureaucracies to formalize its politico-military dominance. It was a rare feat not just for the Islamic State movement but in the history of modern insurgencies. In this respect, Mosul offers an important case study for considering how the Islamic State transitioned to administering a large city, the extent to which the principles identified in Part II were applied in practice, but also whether the Islamic State’s administrative records reflected the *actual* experiences of Mosulis.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. p.12.

¹⁹⁰ This was reported by the following IS provincial media office, Diyala Media Office, ‘توزيع اسطوانات الغاز على المسلمين’ [Giving of gas cylinders], photo report.

¹⁹¹ As reported in Al Hayat Media, ‘Farmers reap the rewards of their harvest by giving zakah’, 1.

¹⁹² This was reported by the following IS provincial media office, Aleppo Information Office, ‘توزيع أموال الزكاة على الفقراء والمحتاجين في أخترين وماحولها’ [Giving charity to the poor], photo report.

¹⁹³ Al Hayat Media, ‘Islamic State liberates the city of Mosul’, 3.

¹⁹⁴ Education is a regular feature in Al Hayat releases. E.g. Al Hayat Media, ‘The widespread ignorance amongst the people’, 10-11; Al Hayat Media, ‘Propagating the Correct Manhaj’, 1-3.

¹⁹⁵ Al Hayat Media, ‘Mujatweets Episode #4 by Al-hayat media center / ISIS /Deutsch / English’, video.

¹⁹⁶ This was reported by the following IS provincial media office, Nineva Information Office, ‘جانب من إكساء الشوارع وتبليط الطرق’ [Paving Street], online.

¹⁹⁷ Unverified report on twitter suggests IS is issuing parking tickets in Raqqa: <https://mobile.twitter.com/TheSyrianWar/status/507606291154345984>.

¹⁹⁸ Al Hayat Media, ‘Islamic State Liberates the City of Mosul’, 1.

A full-spectrum system of control within a propaganda state

Mosul, along with its Syrian capital Raqqa, were the crowning achievements of the Islamic State's caliphate. Footage from the cities were a regular feature in the multilingual propaganda the Islamic State produced for local, regional, and global audiences. As this excerpt from *Flames of War*, the Islamic State's feature-length film from 2014, declares: "The Islamic State was now on show for the world to see. The courts were established; prayer was being enforced; the *hudood* were being implemented; the people were being invited to good; and the *zakat* was being collected and distributed."¹⁹⁹ By late-2014 and into early-2015, the Islamic State had established a surprisingly sophisticated and heavily bureaucratic system of governance in Mosul. Now, as a proto-state, the Islamic State's conventional governance activities reflected Migdal's core *penetrate, regulate, extract, and appropriate* functions especially in Kilcullen's key areas of "control over violence, economic activity, and human security."²⁰⁰ How the Islamic State prioritized its governance of Mosul reflects this literature as Omar Mohammed, who lived under Islamic State occupation in Mosul and secretly reported from the city as "Mosul Eye", explained:

In the first few days and weeks, there were three governance functions that the Islamic State seemed to really focus on. First, was the media department.... It was very important to Daesh that its media was functioning well. Second, was the Islamic State's police and *hisba*.... The third was finance and real estate. This was how the Islamic State controlled money and how the Islamic State controlled property and territories.²⁰¹

Speed and sophistication emerge as the two defining characteristics of the early Islamic State government in Mosul. Mosulis expressed surprise at how quickly the Islamic State was able to implement a departmentally diverse and bureaucratized system of control in the city. As Omar Mohammed said on *Mosul & the Islamic State*: "For Mosulis, we were very surprised at how fast the Islamic State had the functions of media, security and law enforcement, and financial control established in Mosul."²⁰² It is clear that the movement's historical experiences in Mosul and extensive administrative planning were crucial factors. As importantly, the Islamic State co-opted Iraqi government institutions and staff which significantly expedited its transition into a conventional, institutionalized governing apparatus. As Omar Mohammed argues, "We know the secret for why and how the Islamic State was able to implement its system of government so quickly. It basically just took over what was already there, changed the signs, changed the stamps on the paperwork, and brought in its own managers."²⁰³ The sophistication of the Islamic State's system of control in Mosul is also a product of the group coming to the city with a plan *and* co-opting existing structures.²⁰⁴

It is also important to highlight that the Islamic State's system of government was, first and foremost, a propaganda state. As Charlie Winter asserts,

Between 2014 and 2016, propaganda coursed through everything that the Islamic State did on a day-to-day basis. Whether violent or non-violent, whether jihad or governance, and I think that this is something that we often forgotten about. The fact that for every video that was published online on Telegram or Twitter, for every

¹⁹⁹ Al Hayat Media, 2014, *Flames of War*.

²⁰⁰ Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 152.

²⁰¹ Omar Mohammed, 2021, "Episode 3, Part 2: Hell, Trapped", *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁰² Omar Mohammed, 2021, "Episode 3, Part 2: Hell, Trapped", *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁰³ Omar Mohammed, 2021, "Bonus Content: Inside the Islamic State in Mosul", *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁰⁴ For example, these plans were articulated in the Islamic State's *Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State*. See Abu Abdullah al-Masri, 2014, *Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State*, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. www.aymennjawad.org/18215/principles-in-the-administration-of-the-islamic

execution that made it into the headlines in Western media, there was so much more happening in the real world. Happening in Iraq or Syria. *Dawa* or outreach was roaming, media kiosks, dozens of them across urban centers, printed newspapers, cinemas. It was really a huge part of what the Islamic State was about.”²⁰⁵

Everything was calibrated towards projecting and reinforcing the Islamic State’s ideology. For example, all Islamic State government departments and offices had two interrelated responsibilities. First, to fulfil the specific departmental objectives related to the Islamic State’s military. Second, to ensure that in performing those tasks and implementing its agenda, it was championing the Islamic State’s system of meaning. As Omar Mohammed explains,

It is impossible to exaggerate how important this was to the Islamic State. Living under its occupation, it is as if everything is designed to ingrain the system of meaning into our minds. Every department had two basic roles. One, to enforce the Islamic State’s policies whether those policies concern real estate, agriculture, law enforcement, justice or whatever. Two, those activities were designed to reinforce the Islamic State’s ideology. Put another way, the Islamic State in Mosul was a propaganda state. Everything worked towards enforcing and embedding Islamic State’s propaganda into the minds of the people.²⁰⁶

What emerges from this analysis is that the Islamic State had implemented a full spectrum, normative, bureaucratized system of control in Mosul. Seamlessly interwoven throughout its system of control was a systematic and institutionalized effort to inculcate the Islamic State’s system of meaning into the population. Rather than analyse the Islamic State’s media units, this analysis will highlight how other departments and offices were used to champion and reinforce the Islamic State’s ideology. To capture the scope of the Islamic State’s efforts in Mosul, the following analysis focuses on the economy, justice and rule of law, the military, as well as proselytizing and education.

The Economy

The Islamic State had several departments in Mosul that were responsible for extracting resources from the population including the Department of Agriculture and Livestock (*Diwan Zira’a*), Department of Real Estate and Land Tax (*Diwan al-Aqarat wa al-Kharaj*), and Department of Zakat (*Diwan Zakat*). These departments offered various streams of revenue generated via a mix of taxation, confiscation, and “donations” from Mosul’s population. Working with the Islamic Police, both the Agriculture and Real Estate departments confiscated land and properties from those that were deemed to be “apostates,” including Shia Muslims and Christians, that were then redistributed and leased to Islamic State militants.²⁰⁷ Meanwhile, the Islamic State’s zakat officials collected “donations” – from cash to livestock – that were then redistributed to others in the population.²⁰⁸ However, it appears from the detailed records and receipts kept by the department²⁰⁹ that these donations to *zakat* were largely “involuntary” despite the claims of the Islamic State’s media departments.²¹⁰

The Islamic State’s Governance of Agriculture,²¹¹ authored by Devorah Margolin, Mathilde Aarseth, Hans Christensen, Tati Fontana, and Mark Maffett, reveals a bureaucracy that not

²⁰⁵ Charlie Winter, 2021, “Bonus Content: Inside the Islamic State in Mosul”, *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁰⁶ Omar Mohammed, 2021, “Bonus Content: Inside the Islamic State in Mosul”, *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁰⁷ The ISIS Files 02_000272; The ISIS Files 01_000006.

²⁰⁸ The ISIS Files 04_000378.

²⁰⁹ The ISIS Files 03_000360; The ISIS Files 04_000373; The ISIS Files 06_000468.

²¹⁰ For example, Al Hayat Media, ‘Farmers reap the rewards of their harvest by giving zakah’, 1.

²¹¹ Devorah Margolin, Mathilde Aarseth, Hans Christensen, Tati Fontana, Mark Maffett, 2021, *The Islamic State’s Governance of Agriculture*, Program on Extremism. Available here: <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/downloads/765371328?locale=en>

only kept detailed records of land, clientele, crops, and animal stock²¹² but a department that implemented an imposing top-down approach to governance.²¹³ Indeed, the department collected detailed records of who owned land or had it confiscated, the size of properties, leasing agreements, and crop patterns.²¹⁴ Land and property disputes in Mosul and its surrounds has historically been a regular cause of disputes that often escalated into conflict and the Department of Agriculture was positioned to mediate such tensions. Also, farming is a crucial means of revenue generation and feeding Nineveh's population. Consequently, the Department of Agriculture's strict recordkeeping and governance approach would have been an important way for the Islamic State to not only exert control over the population but fund its politico-military activities. While much has been made of the Islamic State's control over major cities and highways across Iraq, especially through 2014-2015, Margolin et al.'s study highlights the multifaceted importance of controlling Nineveh's fertile agricultural lands as a "force multiplier" of territory and population control.

It is also insightful to consider how the Department of Agriculture contributed to broader signaling aims that helped to reinforce the Islamic State's system of meaning. For instance, by confiscating property from those who opposed the group,²¹⁵ the Department of Agriculture was also contributing to ideological, symbolic, and propagandistic aims that helped to (even if indirectly) reinforce the Islamic State's system of meaning. This dynamic was further augmented by the close relationship between the Departments of Agriculture and Zakat in which the former would provide donations for redistribution to the latter. However, ideological considerations could also become a source of tension within the department. For example, disagreements had emerged within the department about whether bureaucrats or God had the right to control market prices.²¹⁶ As Hans Christensen explains:

The Department [of Agriculture] seemed to prefer to use market-based mechanisms as opposed to centrally directing the allocation of resources. However, there were exceptions where the department intervened in the market, and this seemed to have occurred when the department had received a market failure. For instance, the export restrictions and interventions against monopolies. One kind of intervention that appears to have been controversial is the use of price controls. So, although there are those examples, one employee argues that price controls are against sharia law saying that "God alone fixes prices."²¹⁷

Al-Tamimi's *The Islamic State's Real Estate Department: Documents & Analysis*²¹⁸ highlights the importance of land tax (*kharaj*) for the Islamic State given that its capture of territories was projected by the group as legitimate conquest.²¹⁹ The real estate department kept detailed records of the agreements, history, and inventory lists for local properties which then enabled it to closely monitor and enforce its rulings.²²⁰ The Islamic State's confiscation of lands and properties by the real estate department targeted those same groups as the department of agriculture's confiscations: disbelievers, apostates, and those tied to the Iraq government. Al-Tamimi asserts that "in determining the status and distribution of properties in IS [Islamic State] territories, the *Diwan al-Aqarat wa al-Kharaj* did not work alone but rather

²¹² The ISIS Files 20_001099; The ISIS Files 20_001101; The ISIS Files 35_001606; The ISIS Files 29_001447.

²¹³ For a sample of Department of Agriculture and Livestock directives see The ISIS Files 11_000943; The ISIS Files 20_001166.

²¹⁴ For records see: The ISIS Files 07_000533; The ISIS Files 07_000534; The ISIS Files 07_000535.

²¹⁵ For example, this included Shia (07_000531; 07_000533; 07_000535), Christians (07_000537; 07_000542; 07_000576), and land owned by the Iraqi government (07_000544; 07_000545; 07_000547).

²¹⁶ The ISIS Files 20_001157.

²¹⁷ Hans Christensen, 2021, "Bonus Content: Inside the Islamic State in Mosul", *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²¹⁸ Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 2020, *The Islamic State's Real Estate Department: Documents and Analysis*, Program on Extremism. <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/downloads/jm214p12r?locale=en>

²¹⁹ Al-Tamimi, *The Islamic State's Real Estate Department*, pp. 9-14.

²²⁰ The ISIS Files 02_000238; The ISIS Files 02_000241; The ISIS Files 36_001651_03; The ISIS Files 36_001651_12; The ISIS Files 36_001648_31.

in conjunction with the other IS [Islamic State] bureaucratic departments, in particular the judiciary.”²²¹ As the Islamic State’s fortunes ebbed, the confiscation of real estate was used as a lever to prevent or punish those who left its territories. These properties were often leased to Islamic State fighters which includes the items within the property such as furniture.²²² More broadly, the Islamic State’s real estate department generated revenue through the renting of properties to Mosul’s general population while also overseeing rental agreements between citizens.²²³ In a recurring theme across its bureaucracy, the real estate department adopted a top-down, all-encompassing, approach to control while its actions helped to reinforce the Islamic State’s ideology within the population.

Justice & Rule of Law

The Islamic State Police (*shurta*), Department of Religious Compliance (*Diwan al-Hisba*), and Department of Judiciary and Grievances (*Diwan al-Qada wa al-Madhalim*) were crucial arms of the Islamic State’s system of control responsible for law enforcement, conflict mediation, morality, and security.²²⁴ While there was significant crossover between these departments that often resulted in personnel collaborating with their interdepartmental colleagues,²²⁵ each had a specific set of responsibilities. The Department of Judiciary and Grievances had clearly defined bureaucratic processes, with the relevant paperwork to match, for dealing with and pushing issues through the Islamic State’s courts.²²⁶ Similarly, the *Hisba*’s responsibilities as the Islamic State’s “morality police” required its personnel to work from strictly defined rulings on what constituted forbidden behavior upon which they were responsible for providing regular reports.²²⁷ Naturally, these departments, especially the police, also played a crucial role in supporting the enforcement of rulings by other departments (e.g. agriculture, real estate).²²⁸

De Graaf and Yayla’s *Policing as rebel governance*²²⁹ found that the Islamic police were instrumental in consolidating the Islamic State’s rule over Mosul. The Islamic police were responsible for general law enforcement duties covering all matter of issues from domestic disputes and violent crimes to civil and property disputes.²³⁰ While manning checkpoints may seem a relatively menial task, it was vital for security and created opportunities for the Islamic State’s police to engage with the population. Indeed, it was typically at these checkpoints that most Mosulis contacted the police to report issues.²³¹ More broadly, de Graaf and Yayla’s analysis indicates that the police were crucial for not only enforcing the law but, more broadly, facilitating the Islamic State’s governance efforts:

...when it comes to exerting a system of rebel rule, the direct interface the Islamic State Police established with the inhabitants of the areas controlled by ISIS was crucial. It generated the effect of control, presence, performance, and even a sense of legitimacy. “We had a predictable order, and the streets were clean,” said one interviewee summing up his grudging support for the caliphate.²³²

According to de Graaf and Yayla citing defector testimonies, the Islamic police were regularly seen as more effective than the former Iraqi government’s police force and less intimidating than the Islamic State’s *hisba*. From the perspective of creating *relative* stability via functional governance and the outcompeting of rival systems of control, it seems that the Islamic State’s

²²¹ Al-Tamimi, *The Islamic State’s Real Estate Department*, pp.13-14.

²²² Al-Tamimi, *The Islamic State’s Real Estate Department*, pp. 17-18.

²²³ The ISIS Files 35_001588; The ISIS Files 35_001589; The ISIS Files 35_001590.

²²⁴ Pieter van Ostaeven, 2021, “The Islamic State and the Application of Islamic Penal Law”, *The ISIS Reader Online*.

²²⁵ The ISIS Files 02_000236; The ISIS Files 25_001347.

²²⁶ For example see The ISIS Files 25_001352; The ISIS Files 25_001352; The ISIS Files 34_001549_01.

²²⁷ For example, see The ISIS Files 35_001592; The ISIS Files 26_001359; The ISIS Files 26_001358; The ISIS Files 02_000294.

²²⁸ The ISIS Files 02_000272; The ISIS Files 25_001347.

²²⁹ Beatrice de Graaf, Ahmet S. Yayla, 2021, *Policing as rebel governance: The Islamic State police*, Program on Extremism.

²³⁰ 01_000155AU_XE ; 01_000012AU_XE ; 01_000008AU_XE ; 01_000011AU_XE.

²³¹ 01-000075AU.

²³² De Graaf, Yayla, *Policing as rebel governance*, 20.

police had a crucial role at the juncture of “the state” and “the people”. As de Graaf and Yayla assert: “The implementation of a predictable and seemingly uncorrupt law enforcement agency after decades of deep corruption and abuse by government officials was frequently cited with reverence by interviewees.”²³³ The Islamic State clearly saw its police as having a central role in not only protecting Mosul from internal and external threats but, by enforcing its laws, demonstrating the credibility and practical benefits of its system of control to citizens.²³⁴

The Military

Warfighting was central focus for the Islamic State during this period to extend its areas of control, particularly through 2014 and early 2015, and then to defend its territories as pressures along its multiple fronts increased. In *Structure of a State: Captured Documents and the Islamic State's Organizational Structure*, Daniel Milton analyzed the Islamic State as an organization and assessed how it prioritized the allocation of personnel and resources.²³⁵ Overall, he explains that, “Perhaps unsurprisingly, the group dedicated about 80% of its personnel to fighting on the frontlines or carrying out other duties associated with its military effort.”²³⁶ Given the Islamic State’s experiences as a guerrilla force operating below the threshold of *tamkin* for much of its history, one might expect its Department of Soldiers (*Diwan al-Jund*) to educate its fighters in the movement’s insurgency method. Yet primary sources suggest that military education in Mosul was entirely focused on conventional military operations, strategy, and history.²³⁷ Given that the Islamic State was trying to prove its credibility as a conventional actor, it is perhaps unsurprising that its soldiers were being conventionally trained. Moreover, it may have been assessed that it is easier for a conventionally trained warfighter to adapt to unconventional warfare than the reverse. Documents in the military tranche appear to have been gathered from a training facility offering insights into the experience of soldiers²³⁸ but also the banality of the bureaucracy that underpinned the Islamic State’s war machine.²³⁹

The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers, authored by Craig Whiteside et al, traces the evolution of one of the oldest units in the Islamic State movement.²⁴⁰ In doing so, it provides invaluable insights into how an adhocratic organization expands and contracts, simplifies and diversifies, in response to changing conditions. Indeed, what became the Department of Soldiers finds its organizational roots as the military wing, and one of the original units, in Zarqawi’s *Jama’at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad*.²⁴¹ As Zarqawi’s war effort grew, so his military wing expanded with various layers of command overseeing its operations in different parts of Iraq. Then, with the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir held the new role of Minister of War, setting in place the basic structure around which the movement’s military effort would ebb and flow over time.²⁴² From 2013 the ministry experienced its greatest expansion as the Islamic State militarily conventionalized, at least in a hybrid sense. With its routing from Mosul, it would later revert into a guerrilla force. Whiteside et al. argue that “this double transformation (from irregular to hybrid/conventional and back) was eased

²³³ De Graaf, Yayla, *Policing as rebel governance*, 7.

²³⁴ This is evident in a 2014 *Islamic State Report* article with the headline “On the beat: ISR examines how the Islamic Police safeguards ar-Raqqa and their importance in state building”. See Unknown author, 2014, “On the beat: ISR examines how the Islamic Police safeguards ar-Raqqa and their importance in state building”, *Islamic State Report*.

²³⁵ Daniel Milton, 2021, *Structure of a state: Captured Documents and the Islamic State's Organizational Structure*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. <https://ctc.usma.edu/structure-of-a-state-captured-documents-and-the-islamic-states-organizational-structure/>

²³⁶ Daniel Milton, 2021, “Bonus Content: Inside the Islamic State in Mosul”, *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²³⁷ The ISIS Files 13_000992; The ISIS Files 13_000975; The ISIS Files 13_000968; The ISIS Files 12_000967; The ISIS Files 16_001047.

²³⁸ The ISIS Files 13_000981; The ISIS Files 36_001645; The ISIS Files 12_000966.

²³⁹ The ISIS Files 32_001507.

²⁴⁰ Craig Whiteside, et al, 2021, *The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers*, Program on Extremism.

²⁴¹ Whiteside et al. identify the military, *Shari’a*, media, security, and administration/finance as the other wings of *Jama’at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad*.

²⁴² Whiteside et al., *The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers*, pp. 2-5.

by an adhocratic organizational culture that embraced fluidity and constant change.”²⁴³

The picture that emerges from Whiteside’s analysis is that the Islamic State’s Department of Soldiers was akin to a ministry of defence. It had two hallmarks of the Islamic State’s bureaucracy: a seeming obsession with paperwork and a tendency to co-opt Iraqi government institutions and material for its own purposes.²⁴⁴ For example, Whiteside et al. highlight how Iraqi military manuals were edited to reflect the Islamic State’s ideological nuances, but the overall content remained the same. The authors also highlighted the extent to which ideological indoctrination was institutionalized within the Department of Soldiers. Indeed, *Shari’i* were deployed within the Islamic State’s army to platoon level as a means to reinforce its ideology in the ranks and provide jurisprudential approval for actions in the field.²⁴⁵ It emerges as yet another mechanism by which the Islamic State looked to synchronize its systems of control and meaning. As the authors assert, “This group [the Islamic State] embraces Salafi-jihadism to its core and goes to great lengths to indoctrinate all of its fighters in the ways of what it calls ‘the Caliphate on the Prophetic methodology’ – a motto that can be seen at the top of many of these documents.”²⁴⁶

Proselytizing & Education

The Islamic State in Mosul was a *propaganda state* and more than arguably any of the department’s presented thus far, the Islamic State’s *Dawa* and Mosques Administration (*Diwan al-Dawa wa-l-Masajid*) and its Department of Education (*Diwan al-Talim*) are examples of non-media departments that were responsible for ingraining the Islamic State’s system of meaning into the population. Like the Islamic State’s media units, the Departments of *Dawa* and Education were primarily focused on using ideological, symbolic, and propagandistic activities to establish a “lens” through which the populations’ perceptions are shaped and its support polarized. Sharia advisers from the *Dawa* department were ever-present throughout the Islamic State responsible for ingraining ideological beliefs and jurisprudential understanding that would help to facilitate deeper identity-based attitudinal support from the population.²⁴⁷ The education department was intent on ensuring that the Islamic State’s youth would adopt the Islamic State’s system of meaning thus sowing the seeds for an intergenerational struggle.²⁴⁸

In *My Beloved Brothers in God, This is an Invitation: The Islamic State’s Dawa and Mosques Administration*, Zelin highlights how the Islamic State’s use of *dawa* is a relatively recent development in its outreach efforts dating to 2013.²⁴⁹ This is surprising given the Islamic State’s long history of insurgency in Iraq and its previous efforts to establish a state in 2006. Nevertheless, Zelin shows that the Islamic State’s *dawa* initiatives became an important way for it to reach out to communities, especially in Syria but also Iraq, to counter what it saw as misconceptions about the group.²⁵⁰ As Zelin explained on *Mosul and the Islamic State*:

After the *sahwa* movement (tribal awakening) as well as the US surge of troops, and earlier iterations of the group being tactically defeated at least, they wrote this internal memo called the *Fallujah Memorandum*. What is interesting about it is that, at the end of it, there is a section about the necessity of spreading *dawa*. This is around the December 2009, January 2010 time period. So this is a couple of years before we see

²⁴³ Whiteside et al., *The Islamic State’s Department of Soldiers*, p. 1.

²⁴⁴ ISIS Files 13_000983; ISIS Files 13_000984; ISIS Files 13_000986.

²⁴⁵ Whiteside et al., *The Islamic State’s Department of Soldiers*, pp. 7-10.

²⁴⁶ Whiteside et al., *The Islamic State’s Department of Soldiers*, p. 12.

²⁴⁷ Much of the *Dawa* files relate to religious sermons (The ISIS Files 36_001648_46; The ISIS Files 36_001648_56; The ISIS Files 16_001054.) and curriculum for educating *sharia* advisers (The ISIS Files 25_001339; The ISIS Files 35_001605).

²⁴⁸ The ISIS Files 19_001090; The ISIS Files 19_001091; The ISIS Files 19_001083.

²⁴⁹ Aaron Zelin, 2020, *My beloved brothers in God, This is an invitation: The Islamic State’s Dawa and Mosques Administration*, Program on Extremism. <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/report/4q77fr33m>

²⁵⁰ Zelin, *My beloved brothers in God, This is an invitation*, p.13.

the resurgence but you start to see them thinking that it is necessary to reach out more to the local populations.²⁵¹

Zelin goes on to assert that, “Eventually, as they are building themselves back up, in 2013 in particular, you started to see them create these protostructures related to *dawa* in Iraq and Syria. Once they announced their self-created caliphate, this was when the *Diwan* was created and, according to them, it was to assume the maintenance of public interest and to correct the people’s religion, and security. According to ISIS itself, the *Diwan*’s main function was concerned with calling people to God, which is the essence of *Dawa*, and implementing it, preparing and appointing *imams* and preachers, holding preparatory courses, and building and preparing mosques locally.”²⁵² In this sense, *dawa* was used as a soft power instrument by the Islamic State to “reset” perceptions in the community and win support for their cause and agenda. The Islamic State’s *dawa* activities included,

permanent and/or roving *nuqtat i’alamiyah* (media points) in various locations that distributed IS’s [Islamic State’s] media content that was originally released online; passed out its own custom *dawa* literature, which was produced by its al-Himmah Media Office as well as provincial-level statements; erecting billboards throughout cities and villages; and conducting *dawa* forums, among other things.²⁵³

With the Islamic State’s control over Mosul, its *Dawa* department became one of the core administrative mechanisms for implementing *sharia* alongside the Department of Judgements and Grievances and the *Hisba*. What emerges from Zelin’s analysis is the extent to which the Islamic State’s *dawa* program outperformed its online efforts reinforcing the importance the Islamic State placed on flooding its own “citizens” with its ideology. While the Islamic State’s media units are rightly seen as the primary mechanism for projecting its system of meaning to local, regional, and global audiences, within its territories the *Dawa* and Mosques Administration was a crucial arm of its propaganda state. As Omar Mohammed argues, “I described the Islamic State’s *dawa* activities as the group’s internal, domestic propaganda machine operating at the grassroots local level. It played a crucial role in winning over the population using a range of activities including community events, public sermons and games for kids. Really anything and everything to ingrain the Islamic State’s ideology into the minds and the behaviors of people.”²⁵⁴

Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree, authored by Zeiger, Atamuradova, Elsayed and Chung, argues that the Islamic State used education to establish and ingrain its system of meaning in Mosul’s children.²⁵⁵ Zeiger et al argue that internal documents,

reveal the comprehensive, systematized, and institutionalized approach that ISIS took in shaping the norms and values of its community. While some may view education as a necessary yet secondary component of its propaganda efforts, this research reveals that education is actually at the heart of ISIS’s approach to sustaining its perpetual war.²⁵⁶

It is important to acknowledge that war had devastated Mosul’s educational infrastructure and anecdotal reporting indicated that attendance was often low. Indeed, the Islamic State

²⁵¹ Aaron Zelin, 2021, “Bonus Content: Inside the Islamic State in Mosul”, *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁵² Aaron Zelin, 2021, “Bonus Content: Inside the Islamic State in Mosul”, *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁵³ Zelin, *My beloved brothers in God, This is an invitation*, p.16.

²⁵⁴ Omar Mohammed, 2021, “Bonus Content: Inside the Islamic State in Mosul”, *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁵⁵ ElSayed, Lilah, Zeiger, Sara, Chung, Muna, and Atamuradova, Farangiz. *Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree: Establishing a system of meaning through ISIS education*, Program on Extremism, 2021.

https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/catalog?f%5Bmember_of_collection_ids_ssim%5D%5B%5D=z316q1572

²⁵⁶ Zeiger et al., *Planting the seeds of the poisonous tree*, p. 13.

typically had to rely on a mixture of coercion and co-option to recruit students to its schools. However, as the authors show, the Islamic State's educational curriculum needs to be understood within the broader context of the propaganda state which the Islamic State had established in Mosul. Whereas other departments took advantage of existing materials produced by central authorities to expedite governance efforts, the Islamic State looked to replace the school curriculum entirely.²⁵⁷ Like other departments, the department of education implemented a heavy-handed, top-down approach to governance to ingrain its ideology into Mosul's youth as an investment for its intergenerational struggle.²⁵⁸

Women

The largest group impacted by the Islamic State's obsession with segregating and controlling certain identities was, of course, women. In the Islamic State's propaganda appeals to women, it deployed typically bipolar narratives that praised and empowered women who joined the Islamic State as revered mothers, wives, and contributors while other women were condemned as corruptors.²⁵⁹ As Kiriloi Ingram asserts, "Women were also used in Islamic State propaganda to shame men by portraying women as victims that needed saving or by portraying women as active contributors, and later even fighters to shame male inaction."²⁶⁰ The reality in Islamic State controlled territories was far more complex. Margolin and Winter's *The Islamic State's Governance of Women: Victimization, Acquiescence, and Support* reveals the Islamic State's gendered system of governance²⁶¹ and the picture that emerges from the primary sources is complex and deceptive. At one end of the spectrum are women who played an active role in the enforcement of the Islamic State's governance efforts, for example as members of its feared *Hisba*.²⁶² Yet, on the other end of this spectrum, are those who were the victims of the Islamic State such as Christian, Shia, and Yazidi women who were the targets of physical and sexual abuse.²⁶³

In its governance practices, the Islamic State's regulation of women was characterized by the same traits as its broader governance efforts: imposed top-down and bureaucracy heavy. As Devorah Margolin explains in *Mosul & the Islamic State*: "Women's movements, women's bodies, and women's freewill were regulated. Women were required to have a male escort for even the most menial of everyday activities."²⁶⁴ Margolin and Winter's analysis reveals that the Islamic State's abhorrent practice of acquiring female slaves, for example, was essentially a paperwork concern for its bureaucracy whereby fighters were deserving of higher levels of compensation for having more dependents which includes slaves.²⁶⁵ In between these extremes of active support and victimization lies a complex middle in which women found themselves as "passive" in-group and out-group members, largely ignored by the system if compliant, but living in a constant condition of discrimination and mistreatment.

²⁵⁷ The ISIS Files 30_001484.

²⁵⁸ The ISIS Files 35_001577; The ISIS Files 35_001584; The ISIS Files 35_001580.

²⁵⁹ For more see Kiriloi M. Ingram, 2021, "An analysis of Islamic State's gendered propaganda targeted towards women" From territorial control to insurgency", *Terrorism & Political Violence*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2021.1919637>

²⁶⁰ Kiriloi M. Ingram, 2021, "Bonus Content: Inside the Islamic State in Mosul", *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁶¹ Devorah Margolin, Charlie Winter, 2021, *The Islamic State's Governance of Women: victimization, acquiescence, and support*, Program on Extremism. <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/downloads/3484zg88m?locale=en>

²⁶² For example, see The ISIS Files 35_001592AU_XE; The ISIS Files 36_001648_36AU_XE.

²⁶³ For example, see The ISIS Files 35_001641; The ISIS Files 35_001640; The ISIS Files 35_001641.

²⁶⁴ Devorah Margolin, 2021, "Episode 3, Part 2: Hell, Trapped", *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁶⁵ The ISIS Files 36_001648_36AU_XE

Final Remarks: The Caliphate's Collapse

Just as its guerrilla governance efforts had helped to render Iraq's government institutions in Mosul as symbols of dysfunction, by late-2016 the Islamic State's once administratively bloated and bureaucratically dense institutions crumbled under the pressures of a multifront war. Where its bureaucrats and soldiers had previously enjoyed relatively good salaries and benefits, revenue and resources were increasingly siphoned into defense and survival. For Mosul's population, of course, it heralded a period of utter devastation on top of what had been, since the 1980s, decades of war, crippling sanctions, and more war. Within the Islamic State's leadership group, it was probably acknowledged as early as 2015 that its forces would be unable to sustain *tamkin* and, by 2016, al-Adnani used what would be his final speech to essentially prepare its supporters for decline.²⁶⁶ For the Islamic State, certainly from the perspective of its most senior leaders, its routing from Mosul was ultimately seen as part of the inevitable ebbs and flows of waging a perpetual jihad. As the detained senior leader of the Islamic State, Abul Nasser Qardash, stated: "Al-Baghdadi's approach and belief forced us not to grieve over the loss of the land under our control."²⁶⁷ Qardash went on to say: "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assured me in 2017 after the defeat in Iraq that implementing the organization's approach of fighting and exhausting the enemy is more important than achieving victory."²⁶⁸ By the time its forces were removed from Baghuz in Syria, the Islamic State had already ostensibly returned to the condition that has defined most of its history – an insurgency on-the-run – posturing once more to lay the foundations for another resurgence.

Table 4 summarizes the relationship between the insurgency framework in Part I, the Islamic State's insurgency canon in Part II, and the broad analysis of the Islamic State's insurgency practice in Part III. From the perspective of the conceptual framework, the Islamic State's theory and practice of insurgency is an exemplar of the model. From the perspective of the Islamic State's evolving *doctrines* of insurgency and its practice, its thinking and practice has naturally evolved most rapidly during those periods of transition towards either greater unconventionality or conventionality. Moreover, the lessons that were learned during the four historical periods that characterize the Islamic State movement appears to have not only been institutionalized in doctrinal changes but driven evolutions in its practice. This is perhaps most evident when contrasting, on the one hand, Zarqawi's guerrilla operations (circa 2003-06) versus the guerrilla operations of the two Baghdadis (circa 2008-14), as well as the group's hybrid/conventional administration as the Islamic State of Iraq (circa 2006-07) and its control of Mosul (circa 2014-17). This study concludes by examining how the Islamic State's approach to insurgency and the successes it delivered have become sources of emulation and inspiration for its transnational affiliates.

²⁶⁶ For Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's "That They Live By Proof" (2016), including a detailed analysis of its contents, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, 2020, "Defining Success & Failure", *The ISIS Reader*, Hurst & Company, London: pp. 249-261; Unknown author, "From Hijrah to Khilafah", *Dabiq* (issue 1): pp.34-41.

²⁶⁷ Husham Al-Hashimi, 2020, "Interview: ISIS's Abdul Nasser Qardash", *Center for Global Policy*, June 4, 2020: p.7. <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/interview-isiss-abdul-nasser-qardash/>

²⁶⁸ Ibid p.12.

Table 4: Ten Point Insurgency Model, the Islamic State’s insurgency canon, and examples in practice

Insurgency Framework	Examples references Islamic State primary sources	Examples of Islamic State practice
Implement a <i>competitive system of control</i> via politico-military activities and a <i>competitive system of meaning</i> via propaganda and other influence activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>From Hijrah to Khilafah</i> ▪ <i>Zarqawi’s Letter to Al-Qaida Leadership</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> 	Synchronizing politico-military and propaganda activities has characterized the Islamic State’s insurgency efforts since 2003.
Transition through campaign phases characterized by guerrilla military and governance activities in its early stages and more hybrid/conventional activities based on relative strengths and vulnerabilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>From Hijrah to Khilafah</i> ▪ <i>That They Live By Proof</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> ▪ <i>Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the mujahideen (Parts 1-4)</i> ▪ <i>Unless swerving (as a strategy) for war or joining (another) company</i> ▪ <i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i> ▪ <i>Principles in the administration of the Islamic State</i> 	Most of the Islamic State movement’s history has been characterized by varying degrees of guerrilla military and governance activities with two fleeting periods of hybrid-conventional activities. The first was when the group called itself the Islamic State of Iraq circa 2006-07. The second and more significant was between 2014 and 2017 across Syria and Iraq.
Balance military, propaganda, functional, and structural activities throughout the campaign phases focused on three key goals: achieve functional advantage, impose a functional disadvantage on adversaries, and deploy propaganda as a force multiplier/nullifier.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Media Operative, You are also a Mujahid</i> ▪ <i>Analysis of the State of ISI</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> ▪ <i>Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State</i> ▪ <i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i> 	The periods of the Islamic State’s greatest booms (e.g. 2014-16) and busts (e.g. 2007-08) highlight the challenges associated with finding the ‘right’ balance of action and message to out-compete enemies.
Engage in both top-down political activities designed to coerce/recruit established authorities and bottom-up governance activities to win the support of contested populations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Analysis of the State of ISI</i> ▪ <i>Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State</i> ▪ <i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> 	Through rebuilding (circa 2008) to capturing Mosul in 2014, the Islamic State worked hard to restore relationships with tribes/political leaders as well as cater to community needs.
Centralize propaganda as a force multiplier/nullifier and to project a <i>competitive system of meaning</i> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Media Operative, You are also a Mujahid</i> ▪ <i>Zarqawi’s Letter to Al-Qaida Leadership</i> 	Since its founding, the Islamic State movement has always centralized propaganda in its campaign plans.
Target supportive “decisive minorities” for alliance building and recruitment while intimidating or killing oppositional “decisive minorities”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Analysis of the State of ISI</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> ▪ <i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i> 	Rebuilding post-2007-08, it looked to build jihadi <i>sahwa</i> while prioritizing the killing of so-called traitors over even foreign troops.
Build momentum for the campaign through efforts that have cumulative, cyclical, reinforcing effects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>From Hijrah to Khilafah</i> ▪ <i>Zarqawi’s Letter to Al-Qaida Leadership</i> ▪ <i>Analysis of the State of ISI</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> ▪ <i>Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State</i> ▪ <i>Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the mujahideen (Parts 1-4)</i> 	The Islamic State has used assessments of context, enemies, and populations to inform how it prioritized its targeted and timed politico-military activities to transform the environment in its favor. For example, Zarqawi’s triangular war strategy.
Co-opt established government institutions to expedite transitions up campaign phases towards greater conventionality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Principles in the administration of the Islamic State</i> 	The speed and sophistication of the Islamic State’s government in Mosul is largely due to co-option.
Rationalize to expedite transitions down phases towards great unconventionality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>That They Live By Proof</i> ▪ <i>Bringing down towns temporarily as a method of operation for the mujahideen (Parts 1-4)</i> ▪ <i>Unless swerving (as a strategy) for war or joining (another) company</i> 	During the collapse of its so-called caliphate in 2017, the Islamic State rationalized its personnel and resources into priority areas. For example, the restructuring of its affiliates (see Part IV).
Gauge successes and failures by standards relative to both the campaign phase at the time and the adversary’s strengths and weaknesses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>That They Live By Proof</i> ▪ <i>Zarqawi’s Letter to Al-Qaida Leadership</i> ▪ <i>Fallujah Memorandum</i> ▪ <i>Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq</i> 	The <i>tamkin</i> threshold is an important benchmark for the Islamic State to assess activities. Above, it focuses on institution building. Below, on “exhaustion”.

Part IV: Forever Wars, Everywhere

“External relations are the first foundation for building every nascent state, and they are among the foundations that show the strength and might of the state, and they should constitute for it, a general stance in everything that happens in the world with the people of Islam and be for it an external hand protecting its dealings.”

Excerpt from Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State.

To fully appreciate the implications of the Islamic State’s capture of Mosul for the movement’s fortunes, it is also important to consider how the group exploited its successes to drive its transnational spread. Like its capture of Raqqa in Syria, the Islamic State’s propagandists leveraged its occupation of Mosul as an inspirational symbol of the efficacy of its insurgency strategy, the divine grace of its ideology, and the extraordinary achievements that were promised if both were applied no matter the time or the location. Part IV argues that while the group’s first formal affiliate outside Iraq was established in 2013 in Syria, it was in the afterglow of its 2014 successes and the declaration of its caliphate that the Islamic State’s transnational enterprise expanded into territories beyond the direct reach of its operational capabilities. In other words, rather than relying on the deployment of expeditionary forces, the Islamic State could expand its territorial presence (if not actual control) via a varied mix of its own global outreach activities (top-down factors) *and* local groups reaching out to the Islamic State (bottom-up factors).²⁶⁹ Part IV also considers the opportunities and challenges that are likely to emerge for the Islamic State as it manages its global enterprise.

The Islamic State’s Globalization

While the Islamic State’s transnational expansion is a relatively recent development in its history, its global aspirations, networks, and activities have deep historical roots in the movement. In the late-1990s Zarqawi moved to Afghanistan with the founding members of his group to establish camps with the permission of Osama Bin Laden before, in 2003, moving to Iraq where his *Jama’at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* attracted foreign fighters and support to its insurgency. Indeed, Zarqawi’s group also launched terrorist attacks in Jordan, Israel, and Turkey in 2006. None of this is particularly surprising given that, by October 2004, Zarqawi had aligned his group to Bin Laden’s al-Qaida reportedly declaring: “When I gave Baya’a to sheikh Osama, I swear by Allah I didn’t need from him money or weapons or men but I saw in him a symbol for the Ummah to support the religion of Allah Almighty so I became under his command.”²⁷⁰ Zarqawi’s words highlight the importance of Bin Laden’s charismatic appeal acting as the “glue” cohering al-Qaida’s adhococratic global enterprise.²⁷¹ When Bin Laden was killed in 2011, it removed a powerful gravitational force that held otherwise disparate jihadi groups loosely under al-Qaida’s banner.

Bin Laden’s presence as al-Qaida’s figurehead had also acted, however imperfectly, as a buffer against public expressions of discontent by formal and aspiring al-Qaida affiliates. As the Abbottabad papers revealed, a key issue causing tensions within al-Qaida was the conditions required to establish an Islamic State and, on this issue, the Islamic State movement and the *manhaj* (methodology) it championed differed from al-Qaida’s comparatively gradualist

²⁶⁹ Also see Ingram, Whiteside, Winter, 2021, “The routinization of the Islamic State’s global enterprise”, *Hudson Institute*. <https://www.hudson.org/research/16798-the-routinization-of-the-islamic-state-s-global-enterprise>; Ingram, Whiteside, Winter, 2020, “The Islamic State’s Global Insurgency & its Counterstrategy Implications”, *The International Center for Counter-Terrorism*, Vol. 2 (November 2020).

²⁷⁰ Baghdadi, “The declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham”, in Ingram, Whiteside, Winter, 2020, *The ISIS Reader*: p.152.

²⁷¹ For more on al-Qaida as an adhococracy see Haroro J. Ingram, 2013, *The charismatic leadership phenomenon in radical and militant Islamism*, Routledge, London: pp.173-177.

approach.²⁷² Perhaps more so with hindsight, Bin Laden's death arguably contributed to the conditions within which the Islamic State would ultimately challenge al-Qaida as flagship of the global jihad and this is evidenced by the way in which it often tried to present itself as the torchbearers of Bin Laden's vision.

When Baghdadi deployed what was essentially an expeditionary force to Syria in 2011 under the title of *Jabhat al-Nusra* and the leadership of Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani,²⁷³ it was an opportunistic decision that would ultimately lead to the extension of the Islamic State of Iraq's insurgency from the borders of Iraq for the first time. Baghdadi's 2013 announcement that the Islamic State of Iraq was now to be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) formalized Syria as its first province outside of Iraq.²⁷⁴ This history is significant for two reasons. First, the Islamic State's expansion into Syria forced its leadership to grapple with administrative issues related to command and control, division of labor, diffusion of resource and responsibilities outside of Iraq. Given the close proximity of Syria to Iraq, these issues were largely one of scale given that the Islamic State had years of experience managing a heterogenous insurgency – characterized by both military and governance activities – across Iraq.²⁷⁵ Second, many of the risks and opportunities that characterized the formal establishment of Islamic State's Syrian provinces shaped the way in which the group sought to manage its future transnational expansion.²⁷⁶ For example, Baghdadi's declaration that the Islamic State had expanded into Syria sparked a conflict with al-Qa'ida and a division of allegiances amongst jihadi groups that has seen many affiliates since emerge as breakaways from historically al-Qa'ida-aligned groups. For all the personal tensions between al-Qaida and Islamic State leadership, the fundamental strategic and ideological tension is rooted in differences in what is perceived to be the legitimate *manhaj* for establishing an Islamic State. This distinction would prove crucial in the coming years as the Islamic State movement looked to steal away former affiliates, or more commonly breakaway factions of former affiliates, of al-Qaida.

While the Islamic State formally began its transnational expansion in 2013, it was not until after its capture of Raqqa in January 2014 and Mosul in June 2014 that it declared its Caliphate and started to accept affiliates. Mosul was crucial to the extraordinary global expansion of the Islamic State as it became a symbol of the effectiveness of the insurgency method encapsulated in its *manhaj* and the legitimacy of its *aqeeda* (creed). These factors were leveraged by the group's propagandists to attract foreign support, which included establishing affiliates, in several ways. For instance, propaganda content was produced that promoted the Islamic State's operational and strategic acumen. In the aftermath of its Mosul successes, its multilingual magazines and videos lavished praise on the effectiveness of its *manhaj* as a strategy to defeat materially superior forces and establish control over territories and populations.²⁷⁷ Moreover, successes in the field were framed as testimonies of faith and thus manifestations of divine grace. This is perhaps most explicit with the *mubalahah*

²⁷² Lahoud, Nelly, Caudill, Stuart, Collins, Liam, Koehler-Derrick, Gabriel, Rassler, Don, Al-'Ubaydi, Muhammad, 2012, *Letters from Abbottabad Bin Ladin Sidelined?* Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, New York. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined/>

²⁷³ Charles Lister, 2015, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, London: Hurst; Cole Bunzel, 2013, 'Introducing the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria', Centre for Strategic Communication at Arizona State University (9 Apr. 2013); Thomas Joscelyn, 2013, 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Al-Nusra Front emerge as rebranded single entity', Long War Journal (9 Apr. 2013); Aaron Zelin, 2013 'Al-Qaeda Announces an Islamic State in Syria', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (9 Apr. 2013).

²⁷⁴ For analysis of this period see Ingram, Whiteside, Winter, 2020, "The declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (2013)", pp.149-160, in *The ISIS Reader*, Oxford University Press: New York.

²⁷⁵ For an in-depth analysis of how previous iterations of the Islamic State movement managed its insurgencies across Iraq see the declassified *Study of the Insurgency in Anbar Province, Iraq* especially "Chapter 3: Anbar Insurgency: The Seeds are Planted – The formation and motivating factors (2003)", "Chapter 5: Anbar: Insurgency grows, strengthens, elections (2005)", "Chapter 6: AQI dominates the insurgency (2006)". <https://ahcc.armywarcollege.edu/CENTCOM-IRAQ-papers/>

²⁷⁶ For more see Abu al-Faruq al-Masri, 1437AH, Message on the Manhaj, translated by Aymenn Jawal al-Tammimi, www.aymennjawad.org/19341/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-abu-al-faruq-al; Husham Al-Hashimi, 2020, "Interview: ISIS's Abdul Nasser Qardash", Center for Global Policy, Washington D.C. (4 June 2020). <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/interview-isis-abdul-nasser-qardash/>

²⁷⁷ For example, Al Hayat Media, 2014, *Flames of War*; Al Hayat Media, 'Propagating the Correct Manhaj', 1-3; Unknown author, "From Hijrah to Khilafah", *Dabiq* (issue 1): pp.34-41.

(imploing Allah's to condemn the deceitful party with failure) declared between the Islamic State and *Jabhat al-Nusra* in March 2014. With the extraordinary successes that characterized the rest of that year for the Islamic State, the group's propagandists used those achievements as proof of God's blessings.²⁷⁸ Indeed, the Islamic State's successes were highlighted to target audiences to make the jurisprudential and ideological claim that, having established the caliphate with al-Baghdadi as Caliph, all Muslims were obliged to join its ranks. As Abu Muhammad al-Adnani declared:

"We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of khilāfah, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalīfah Ibrāhīm and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khilāfah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas."²⁷⁹

By demonstrating the application of its *manhaj* could achieve extraordinary successes and declaring a caliphate thereby establishing a jurisprudential obligation for joining the group, the Islamic State sought to catalyze those bottom-up dynamics whereby local groups reach out to become affiliates. During this time, the apocalypse was a prominent theme in its propaganda messaging acting as an additional catalyst to compel individuals and groups to join them.²⁸⁰ It was not just that the Islamic State declared its caliphate, but the proof of concept evidenced in its real-world successes that created a self-reinforcing cycle of logic exploited by its propagandists. Its resonance is evident in the results. The wave of foreign fighters joining its ranks was unprecedented. As Chelsea Damon explained on *Mosul & the Islamic State*: "By 2015 there was an estimated number of thirty thousand foreign fighters from around a hundred different countries who joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The largest of these came from Middle East and North African nations with Tunisia supplying the highest amount."²⁸¹ So too were the pledges by groups wishing to be accepted under the Islamic State's banner and soon after the announcement of its caliphate by the end of 2014 formal provinces had been established in Libya, Yemen, Egypt (Sinnai), Algeria, and Saudi Arabia.²⁸² By the middle of 2015, the Islamic State would have formal provinces established in Afghanistan-Pakistan (Khurasan),²⁸³ Nigeria (West Africa Province),²⁸⁴ and the Caucasus.²⁸⁵

The Islamic State's global push reflected an internal belief within the organization that global expansion was ideologically obligatory, strategically necessary, and symbolically powerful. As articulated in *Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State*: "External relations are the first foundation for building every nascent state, and they are among the foundations that show the strength and might of the state, and they should constitute for it, a general stance in everything that happens in the world with the people of Islam and be for it an external hand protecting its dealings."²⁸⁶ It goes onto assert, "Indeed external relations are key to knowing the international politics surrounding the Islamic State, and alliances should be as a guarantee

²⁷⁸ For example, Unidentified author, 2014, "The flood of the mubalahah", *Dabiq* 2: pp.20-30.

²⁷⁹ Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, 2014, *This is the Promise of Allah*, Al-Hayat Media.

²⁸⁰ Will McCants, 2015, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, St. Martin's Press, New York.

²⁸¹ Chelsea Damon, 2021, "Episode 3, Part 2: Hell, Trapped", *Mosul & the Islamic State*. <https://shows.acast.com/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁸² Unknown author, 2014, "Remaining and Expanding", *Dabiq* (issue 5): pp.22-33.

²⁸³ Announced by the Islamic State's spokesman in January 2015. See Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 2015, "Say, 'Die in your Rage'", AlHayat, 26 January 2015. For more on Islamic State's Khurasan Province see Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines, Abdul Sayed, 2021, "What is ISIS-K?", *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/what-is-isis-k-two-terrorism-experts-on-the-group-behind-the-deadly-kabul-airport-attack-and-its-rivalry-with-the-taliban-166873>; Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines, Abdul Sayed, 2021, "The evolving Taliban-ISK rivalry", *The Interpreter*. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/evolving-taliban-isk-rivalry>

²⁸⁴ Announced by the Islamic State's spokesman in March 2015. See Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 2015, "So they kill and are killed", 12 March 2015.

²⁸⁵ Announced by the Islamic State's spokesman in June 2015. See Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 2015, "O Our People Respond to the Caller of Allah", 23 June 2015.

²⁸⁶ Abu Abdullah al-Masri, 2014, "Chapter Nine: Administration of Relations", *Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State*, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. www.aymennjawad.org/18215/principles-in-the-administration-of-the-islamic

of force and leverage that the Islamic leadership can use in all its matters with the external world.”²⁸⁷

With the Islamic State’s global expansion came complex challenges. The central issue was how to ensure that affiliates championed the Islamic State’s “brand” by adhering to its ideology and applying its strategy. The Islamic State established criteria which its affiliates were expected to satisfy. This included pledging (*bayat*) to the caliph, the group’s leaders being approved and pledging, efforts by the local group to consolidate other groups and factions under a single banner, as well as adopting and applying the group’s *manhaj* and *aqeeda*.²⁸⁸ From the Islamic State’s perspective, its primary exports to its affiliates are its *aqeeda* and *manhaj* as well as, for propaganda purposes, association with the Islamic State brand. In return, its affiliates offer an almost endless pool of fodder for its propaganda machine, strategic depth to its global campaign, potential recruits from around the world and opportunities for revenue and resource generation.²⁸⁹

It has been a constant challenge for the Islamic State to find the appropriate balance between the ideological drive to expand and the need for affiliates to enhance its brand and agenda. When the group first stretched its areas of control from Iraq into Syria, designating provinces was largely an administrative issue related to the management of command and control, territory, resources, personnel, and actions. However, the opportunity for the Islamic State to expand its reach across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia emerged – it was an opportunity it had created for itself in part due to its own jurisprudential rulings and their implications.²⁹⁰ There were discrepancies between the first round of official affiliates announced in 2014 and subsequent announcements in 2015 which the Islamic State formally acknowledged in an article titled “Remaining and Expanding” in its English-language magazine *Dabiq*:

Prior to the announcement of the new wilāyāt, a number of groups in Khurāsān, alQawqāz, Indonesia, Nigeria, the Philippines, and elsewhere had pledged their allegiance to the Khalīfah, and continue to do so daily. The Islamic State announced the acceptance of the bay’āt from all of these groups and individuals – may Allah accept their noble oath and keep them firm upon their covenant, free of falter – but delayed the announcement of their respective wilāyāt, while recognizing that some groups from the aforementioned lands are larger and stronger than a few of those related to the newly announced wilāyāt. This delay should end with either the appointment or recognition of leadership by the Khalīfah for those lands where multiple groups have given bay’āt and merged, or the establishment of a direct line of communication between the Khalīfah and the mujāhid leadership of lands who have yet to contact the Islamic State and thus receive information and directives from the Khalīfah. The group and its leaders perform a public pledge (*bayat*) to the caliph which is accepted by Islamic State and a new province is declared.²⁹¹

That the Islamic State recognized “that some groups from the aforementioned lands are larger and stronger than a few of those related to the newly announced wilāyāt”²⁹² highlights inconsistencies in the degree to which groups were expected to have applied its *manhaj*.

²⁸⁷ Abu Abdullah al-Masri, 2014, “Chapter Nine: Administration of Relations”, *Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State*, translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. www.aymennjawad.org/18215/principles-in-the-administration-of-the-islamic

²⁸⁸ This is based on primary sources including Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 2014, *This is the Promise of Allah*, Al-Hayat Media; Unknown author, 2015, Unknown author, 2014, “Remaining & Expanding”, *Dabiq* (issue 5): pp.22-33; Unknown author, 2015, “Wilayat Khurasan and the bay’at from Qawqaz”, *Dabiq* (issue 7): pp. 33-37; Unknown author, 2015, “A fatwa for Khurasan”, *Dabiq* (issue 10), pp.18-24; Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 2015, “O Our People Respond to the Caller of Allah”, 23 June 2015; Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 2015, “So they kill and are killed”, 12 March 2015; Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 2015, “Say, ‘Die in your Rage’”, AlHayat, 26 January 2015; Al-Furqan Media, 2016, “The structure of the caliphate”, *Al-Furqan* (video).

²⁸⁹ Also see Ingram, Whiteside, Winter, 2021, “The routinization of the Islamic State’s global enterprise”, *Hudson Institute*. <https://www.hudson.org/research/16798-the-routinization-of-the-islamic-state-s-global-enterprise>

²⁹⁰ Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 2014, *This is the Promise of Allah*, Al-Hayat Media.

²⁹¹ Unknown author, 2014, “Remaining & Expanding”, *Dabiq* (issue 5): p.24.

²⁹² Unknown author, 2014, “Remaining & Expanding”, *Dabiq* (issue 5): p.24.

Given the immense pressures placed upon the nascent caliphate in its territories across Syria and Iraq, its transnational expansion inevitably tested its administrative and strategic capacities fueling internal organizational tensions. Reflecting its highly bureaucratized approach at the time, the Islamic State had established an 'Administration of Distant Wilayat' responsible for managing affiliates outside of Iraq and Syria. In the 2016 *Al-Furqan Media* video titled 'Structure of the Caliphate', the narrator declared that:

For with the expansion of the Islamic State, it became necessary to create effective ways to administer and supervise its territory. This led to the formation of the *wilayat*. They are regional divisions set up in order to facilitate the affairs of governance in the Islamic State. Each region is headed by a wali designated by the *khalifa*. The *wali* refers any serious matters to the Delegated Committee and governs the *wilaya's* subjects.²⁹³

The narrator goes on to suggest that the Islamic State had a total of thirty-five provinces – 19 in Syria and Iraq, 16 elsewhere – each of which had fourteen offices related to various aspects of the Islamic State's governance apparatus.²⁹⁴ While this may have been the case in *some* of the Islamic State's provinces, it is best to interpret this as largely propagandistic in intent given the varying strategic conditions across these territories. Indeed, evidence of internal dissent within the Islamic State indicates that there were concerns that its leadership had mishandled its transnational spread, diverted attention and resources away from its heartland, and too hastily accepted provinces that were unlikely to achieve *tamkin*.²⁹⁵ Moreover, dissent in the ranks of its province in Yemen circa. 2015-16 highlighted the tensions that could emerge between the Islamic State's core and the peripheries of its transnational reach.²⁹⁶

As the pressures of a multifront war intensified across its heartlands of Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State's ability to manage its core insurgency and broader transnational network strained. In 2018, seemingly in response to these pressures, the Islamic State restructured and rationalized across its transnational affiliates. Without fanfare, the number of Islamic State provinces more than halved. The bulk of this rationalization occurred across Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya where twenty-eight provinces across these territories were consolidated into four provinces, ironically, following country borders.²⁹⁷ Across Asia and Africa, the Islamic State broadened the territorial parameters of its provinces to elevate groups which had previously not been granted provincial status under multinational banners such as the Islamic State East Asia and Islamic State Central Africa.²⁹⁸ Meanwhile, provinces such as Islamic State West Africa (ISWAP)²⁹⁹ and Islamic State Khurasan³⁰⁰ extended its territorial claims. As its decline continued, the Islamic State launched a global campaign to renew pledges to al-Baghdadi in 2019 and then, after he was killed, pledges to his replacement Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi.³⁰¹

²⁹³ Ingram, Whiteside, Winter, 2020, "The structure of the caliphate", p.235, in *The ISIS Reader*, Oxford University Press: New York; Also, Al-Furqan Media, 2016, "The structure of the caliphate", *Al-Furqan* (video).

²⁹⁴ Ingram, Whiteside, Winter, 2020, "The structure of the caliphate", pp.235-236, in *The ISIS Reader*, Oxford University Press: New York.

²⁹⁵ Abu al-Faruq al-Masri, 1437AH, *Message on the Manhaj*, translated by Aymenn Jawal al-Tammimi, www.aymennjawad.org/19341/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-abu-al-faruq-al

²⁹⁶ "Dissent in the Islamic State's Yemen Affiliates: Documents, Translation & Analysis", translated by Aymenn Jawd Tamimi, www.aymennjawad.org/2016/02/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-yemen-affiliates

²⁹⁷ BBC Monitoring, 2018, "Analysis: Islamic State restructures its 'provinces' a year on from 2017 defeats", BBC (17 October 2018). <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200bdcn>

²⁹⁸ BBC Monitoring, 2018, "Analysis: Islamic State restructures its 'provinces' a year on from 2017 defeats", BBC (17 October 2018). <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200bdcn>

²⁹⁹ Jacon Zenn, 2020, "ISIS in Africa: The caliphate's next frontier", Center for Global Policy (26 May 2020). <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-africa-the-caliphates-next-frontier/>

³⁰⁰ Amira Jadoon, 2020, "Islamic State in Khorasan: Attempting to absorb rival groups", *Center for Global Policy*. <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/islamic-state-in-khorasan-attempting-to-absorb-rival-groups/>

³⁰¹ Aaron Zelin, 2019, "The Islamic State's Bayat Campaign", *Jihadology* (3 November 2019): <https://jihadology.net/2019/11/03/the-islamic-states-bayat-campaign/>

The 2018 restructure of its transnational enterprise is a significant marker in the Islamic State's evolution as a politico-military movement. It represents a shift in not only how its transnational affiliates would be organized and managed but how the Islamic State would project its broader agenda to the world. While Iraq and Syria will continue to have strategic priority within the ranks of its core and those territories will always have pride of place in the movement's folklore, the restructure meant that Iraq and Syria were provinces amongst a global spectrum of affiliates. This afforded Islamic State's leaders and propagandists the flexibility to draw attention towards and away from a global array of provinces depending on their fortunes at the time. In theory, at least, the Islamic State could bring more groups into the fold with less direct "command and control" oversight as it settled into the battle rhythms of a steady, grinding insurgency but now on a global scale.

Managing a Global Insurgency

The adhoc organizational traits that enabled the Islamic State to manage its insurgency across Iraq from 2003/04 and then across Iraq and Syria from 2013 are now being applied across its global campaign. The Islamic State is engaged in a global adhoc insurgency characterized by a variety of irregularly managed and geographically dispersed jihadi groups ostensibly applying the Islamic State's ideology and insurgency method as formally acknowledged affiliates. It is useful to think of the Islamic State's global affiliates as sitting on a spectrum that represents varying degrees of (a.) centralized "command and control" influence and/or material support from the Islamic State, (b.) the affiliate's operational activities as an insurgency and strategic potential to achieve *tamkin* and, (c.) the extent to which the affiliate is featured in Islamic State propaganda.

At one end of this spectrum are the Islamic State's provinces in Iraq and Syria which are centrally controlled and materially supported, have a demonstrated potential to achieve *tamkin*, and are regularly featured in the central media unit's propaganda. At the other extreme of this spectrum are provinces that are almost entirely aspirational and mostly inactive such as Algeria, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.³⁰² Between these two extremes are an eclectic range of affiliates. There are the Khurasan and West Africa provinces which have reportedly had some influence from central and pockets of *tamkin* towards one end of this middle. To the other are provinces like East Asia and Central Africa that encapsulate a range of geographically dislocated groups, many of whom pledged years ago but were only elevated as part of the 2018 restructure, and with little evidence of substantive influence from central. It can also be difficult to gauge the extent to which their operational activities and strategic intent has substantively changed because of Islamic State affiliation or whether, for the most part, the link is an opportunity to reframe their activities for largely propagandistic purposes.

The Islamic State's global affiliates encapsulate a varied patchwork of operational capabilities and strategic potential. This diversity is reflected in the varied extent to which the Islamic State's leadership and central propaganda units highlight the activities of its respective affiliates. It follows that those affiliates that are best representing the Islamic State's "brand" by applying its ideology and insurgency method at any given time are more likely to have their activities amplified by its central media units. This practice may also help to incentivize affiliates to at least frame their activities in the language of the Islamic State's *manhaj* if not reshape their operational activities to catch the eye of central. The deployment of liaison personnel and the use of modern communications technologies is also a crucial way for the Islamic State to facilitate ideological, operational, and strategic coherence across its global network. So too do propaganda messages. For example, *Al Naba* articles will often feature

³⁰² BBC Monitoring, 2018, "Analysis: Islamic State restructures its 'provinces' a year on from 2017 defeats", BBC (17 October 2018). <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200bdcn>

doctrinal guidelines while the speeches of Islamic State leaders calling for global “attrition”, “harvesting”, and “breaking the walls” campaigns contribute to the perception of coherence.

It can be very difficult to assess the extent to which the Islamic State’s affiliates are significantly applying the Islamic State’s insurgency method and, in doing so, changing their operational and strategic priorities accordingly. After all, it is in the Islamic State’s interests to project itself as a ubiquitous movement engaged in forever wars everywhere. Often, Islamic State affiliates have tended to emerge as breakaway factions from established local insurgencies amidst or emerging from a period of struggle. As a former insurgent told the author in 2019: “the weak join ISIS, the strong don’t have to.” It is typically in the local affiliate’s favor to try and amplify its strength by association with the Islamic State. Moreover, local affiliates often seek material and strategic support from the Islamic State and emphasizing the extent to which it is championing the “brand” and applying the *manhaj* can contribute towards those goals. This also highlights the potential for a kind of mutual exploitation where the Islamic State is compelled to overstate its global connections and direct local affiliates towards actions that are in its transnational favor (but not necessarily locally beneficial) while the local affiliate overstates its connection to the Islamic State and the extent to which it is applying its guidance in pursuit of material and propaganda benefits.

Flagship of the Global Jihad

What emerges from Part IV of this report is that the more recent history of the Islamic State’s long jihad is also a story of transnational expansion via expeditionary forces and, in more recent years, inspiration and amplification. From an Iraq-centric insurgency since 2003 to an Iraq-Syria insurgency since 2013, the Islamic State has mounted a global insurgency since 2018 marked by the restructure and rationalization of its transnational enterprise in the wake of crushing defeats in its heartlands. It is easy to point to the Islamic State’s declaration of a caliphate and its apparent jurisprudential implications as the driver of its globalization from 2014 onwards. However, it is vital to acknowledge the *practical* appeal of its primary exports to affiliates: brand, ideology, and strategy. Perhaps the most important, in terms of medium to long term impact shaping war and governance practice in different corners of the world will be its insurgency method. What may begin for the local affiliate as a largely propaganda-based decision to adopt the Islamic State’s *manhaj* may, over time, see its principles increasingly applied in the field and, over more time, shaping practice with significant implications for broader conflict dynamics and counterstrategy development.

Conclusion

“True defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight.”

Excerpt from Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's final speech, That They Live By Proof, 2016.

This study began by presenting a model of insurgency (Part I) which it then applied to analyze the Islamic State's doctrine (Part II) and practice of insurgency (Part III) before considering its role and implications for the Islamic State's global enterprise (Part IV). In doing so, it positioned the Islamic State's insurgency canon amongst those of the “great” modern insurgency doctrines while exploring how its approach to war, governance, and propaganda harnesses strategic mechanisms and psychosocial factors that are crucial to success in modern irregular warfare. It applied these findings to analyze the Islamic State insurgency in practice providing a broad strategic and historical context for understanding the Islamic State's occupation and control of Mosul. Overall, this study cautiously offers four contributions to the scholarly and policy fields.

First, it argued that modern insurgencies should be understood as contests between rival systems of control and meaning seeking to out-compete each other for the support of contested populations and control of territory and resources. The model looked to capture strategic mechanisms and psychosocial factors that appear to be crucial in modern insurgency successes and failures. Some of those key strategic mechanisms refer to the distinctions and interrelationships between military, structural, functional, and propaganda dimensions, the importance of functional advantage for an insurgency and imposing a functional disadvantage on adversaries throughout campaign phases, as well as the central role of propaganda in campaign efforts. The model also highlighted some key psychosocial factors that include the importance of recognizing variations in different types of behavioral and attitudinal support, how different types of actions and messaging inevitably seek to generate different types of support, and the disproportionate impact that “decisive minorities” may have on overall support trends across a population.

Second, this study analyzed fourteen Islamic State publications that arguably represent the core of its insurgency canon; at least in the absence of a publicly available singular doctrine. The seventeen years of knowledge and experience that is captured in these publications provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the Islamic State's approach to war, governance, and propaganda throughout the phases of its insurgency method. This study found that the Islamic State's approach to insurgency as articulated in the fourteen selected sources is an exemplar of the insurgency model in Part I. However, it is just as important to recognize that the Islamic State's insurgency canon is the product of not only the strategic culture within the movement and the thinking of its strategic and operational architects but the hard learned lessons from fighting against history's greatest military superpower and a dizzying array of other adversaries.

Third, this study broadly analyzed the Islamic State's insurgency leading to its capture and occupation of Mosul. Drawing mostly on primary source materials, it showed how the Islamic State engaged in a protracted, multi-phase insurgency campaign, exploiting the missteps of its rivals, to eventually capture one of Iraq's largest cities. The Islamic State's occupation of Mosul was characterized by its implementation of a full spectrum, normative, system of control within an all-encompassing propaganda state. The group that first implemented its agenda in the camps of Afghanistan in the late-1990s has transformed over two decades from an Iraq-centric insurgency to a global insurgency. From the Islamic State movement's origins, implementing its system of government was never some abstract aspiration or something limited to 2006 and 2014 when it established its hybrid/conventional Islamic State. Rather, it has been a constant feature of its campaigning with the extent of implementation always being

relative to available opportunities and resources. As an insurgency, the Islamic State's system of government would be implemented, to varying degrees, in camps but also, where possible, informally and covertly in the communities within which it operates. Throughout its campaign phases, the Islamic State will constantly look for opportunities to impose a functional disadvantage on adversaries, achieve a functional advantage for its system of control, and project its system of meaning via propaganda and other influence activities.

Fourth, this study argued that the Islamic State movement is now engaged in a global insurgency. It is an extraordinary achievement for a group that was, less than two decades ago, a small peripheral player in Iraq's deteriorating security situation. What has enabled the Islamic State to engage in a genuinely global, if archipelagic, insurgency are two crucial factors. First, it has exported its method of insurgency to affiliates meaning these globally disparate actors share a suite of core strategic principles. Second, the Islamic State's adhocratic traits imbue it with the organizational mechanisms to manage its global insurgency and adapt to rapidly changing conditions. The prospect is that the Islamic State's affiliates will pose newer and bloodier challenges for those seeking to confront them. However, it is important to recognize that it will take time for them to adopt and adapt the Islamic State's method of insurgency.

Limitations

Given the range of the history and themes addressed in this study, its analyses are purposely and necessarily broad although readers are provided with a range of sources throughout the analysis that offer more granular insights. Consequently, significant overarching limitations for each part of this report need to be acknowledged. In Part I, the model of insurgency presented concepts which require further elaboration and testing via application to different case studies. In Part II, the fourteen sources that were selected for analysis are ultimately a substitution for the absence of a publicly available official and complete Islamic State insurgency doctrine. In Parts III and IV there is enormous scope for far more in-depth analyses of the Islamic State's insurgency practices. Ultimately, this study sought to introduce concepts and analytical approaches that would provide the foundations for not only future analyses related to the Islamic State and its affiliates but, potentially, to other insurgencies too.

Research Recommendations

Based on this study's findings, five areas for future research emerge as particularly significant:

First, a greater focus on comparative studies would significantly enhance scholarly and practitioner understanding of the Islamic State movement. There is, of course, great value in comparative studies of a particular aspect of the Islamic State's military, governance, or propaganda activities contrasted across different times and/or locations. Such comparative studies could contrast across different historical periods but in the same location or focus on a particular period but drawing on different locations. Equally important will be broader disciplinary studies that use the Islamic State as a case study for the purposes of contrasting it with other groups. For example, the model of insurgency developed in Part I could be used to compare the Islamic State's insurgency theory and practice to that of other modern insurgencies. These different methodological and disciplinary perspectives each offer a different color that helps to give subtlety and nuance to how the Islamic State, but also broader phenomena like rebel governance and civil wars, are understood.

Second, much more research needs to be devoted to analyzing the extent to which and in what ways the Islamic State's method of insurgency is adopted by its global affiliates. After all, for a group to be formally accepted as an Islamic State affiliate it must, amongst other

requirements, adopt the Islamic State's *aqeeda* and *manhaj*.³⁰³ Consequently, there can seem to be a broad uniformity of strategic and operational activities across the Islamic State's transnational network although there is significant variability too. The challenge for scholars is to identify both the extent to which local affiliates adopt and apply the Islamic State's approach to war, governance, and propaganda, and the mechanisms by which that transfer occurs. This research has significant implications for practice and is likely to become more prominent as the Islamic State seeks, for the time being, to divert attention from its heartlands of Syria and Iraq by drawing attention to its satellites.

Third, throughout the history captured in this study it was clear that the Islamic State was constantly grappling with tensions between ideological forces within the group compelling it to operate in ways that ultimately clashed with the practical needs of engaging in an insurgency that relies on winning the support of the local population. For example, Bunzel³⁰⁴ and al-Tamimi³⁰⁵ have addressed the recurring issue of *takfir* and its implications for the Islamic State's politico-military efforts, especially its engagement with contested populations. In this report, it is the tension between the Islamic State's ideological obligation to declare a state and administer the *sharia* once it has reached the threshold of *tamkin* that has, often, seen the group struggle to strategically and organizationally transition in a manner that is sustainable. Similar tensions have emerged as the Islamic State begun to accept international affiliates into the fold at a time when prominent voices in the movement were calling for it to focus on consolidating its successes in Iraq and Syria.³⁰⁶ This is an area of research that requires more focus especially given the Islamic State's transnational reach.

Fourth, there is a dearth of literature examining the Islamic State's leaders, their impact on the movement's evolution, and how the Islamic State has influenced leadership trends in the global jihadist movement more broadly. This is surprising given the impact of individuals such as Zarqawi, "the Two Sheikhs", Adnani, and Baghdadi. There is a pattern emerging whereby the Islamic State seems to identify and develop impressive leaders. For instance, one of its most prominent defectors, Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, has risen to become a prominent figure in the global jihadist milieu. More leadership focused research would not only enhance understanding of the Islamic State movement but help to inform more nuanced strategic-policy decisions about how best to undermine the rise and influence of such figures.

Policy recommendations

Several themes emerge from this study that offer insights into the Islamic State's strengths and vulnerabilities which are important for practitioners. This is a movement that appears to deeply appreciate that decisive actions, synchronized with messaging and appropriately timed can help to trigger and fuel strategic and psychosocial conditions that benefit it and disadvantage its enemies. Generations of the Islamic State's leaders have demonstrated great faith in the necessity to strategically oscillate through campaign phases to operationally realize its creed of forever war. The Islamic State understands, far better than most of its adversaries, that what constitutes "success" or "failure" is entirely relative to variables such as the campaign phase, time, location, context, and the condition of one's adversaries.

Perhaps most importantly, the Islamic State understands that there is no such thing as a "perfect" operation, strategy, or campaign, just a constant effort to out-compete one's

³⁰³ Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, Charlie Winter, 2020, "The Islamic State's Global Insurgency & its Counterstrategy Implications", *The International Center for Counter-Terrorism*, Vol. 2 (November 2020): pp.21-46.

³⁰⁴ For example, Cole Bunzel, "The Islamic State's Ideology: History of a Rift," Program on Extremism, George Washington University, (June 2020), <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/downloads/kp78gg36g?locale=en>

³⁰⁵ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, 2018, *Islamic State Divided: Competing Theological and Ideological Trends*, November 23, 2018: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21812/islamic-state-divided-competing-theological>

³⁰⁶ Al-Masri, Abu al-Faruq, "1437AH, Message on the Manhaj," 31 October 2016. Translated by Aymenn Jawal al-Tammimi. Available at: www.aymennjawad.org/19341/dissent-in-theislamic-state-abu-al-faruq-al

enemies. Of course, the Islamic State has significant vulnerabilities. For one, this is a movement that has often struggled to balance its ideological compulsions with practical necessities. It is particularly susceptible to derailing itself trying to balance these tensions during those periods of strategic transition. Its greatest fear, expressed consistently throughout its history, even more than the awesome airpower of coalition forces, is losing the support of those “decisive minorities” in local Sunni populations that have been crucial to its survival and success. This study concludes with three broad recommendations relevant to strategic-policy practitioners.

First, the findings of this study highlight the importance of maintaining military and intelligence pressures on the Islamic State and its affiliates *particularly* during periods of strategic and organizational transition. It is clear from the Islamic State’s own internal publications that there are certain counterstrategy efforts that consistently concern its leaders. Air support has devastated the Islamic State and, militarily, it is a theatre which the group simply cannot compete. The provision of air support to local fighting forces provides a significant advantage which the Islamic State has continually struggled to manage. For local allied ground forces confronting well-armed and battle-hardened insurgents, combat air support and intelligence are the keystone arch of militarily defeating the Islamic State’s fighters in the field. The other factors that the Islamic State constantly express concerns about is that its primary target audience – Sunni Muslims in its areas of potential control – will align against them. While recognizing the importance of addressing governance vacuums to win the behavioral support of the apolitical majority is essential, so too is targeting “decisive minorities” in those communities with government and civil society programs to ensure that those with disproportionate influence are either won over or their impact blunted.

Second, with the emergence of Islamic State affiliates in different parts of the world, it is essential that training is provided to local civilian government, military, and civil society sectors to help them identify and understand Islamic State strategies. This type of multisector support should be designed to give locals the knowledge and strategic tools to develop *locally* nuanced counterstrategies. This will require the development of training curriculum that draws on both the latest empirical research *and* practical experience confronting the group.

Finally, given that this study offers practitioners a broad analytical framework for understanding modern insurgencies *and* applies it to the Islamic State, Table 5 outlines some of the key strategic-policy implications of these findings. While this is not an exhaustive list, it does demonstrate the potential utility of the ten-point framework for considering counterstrategy options to confront modern insurgencies such as those by the Islamic State and its affiliates.

Table 5: Ten Point Insurgency Model, the Islamic State’s insurgency, and strategic-policy implications

Insurgency Framework	Examples of Islamic State practice	Strategic-policy implications
Implement a <i>competitive system of control</i> via politico-military activities and a <i>competitive system of meaning</i> via propaganda and other influence activities.	Synchronizing politico-military and propaganda activities has characterized the Islamic State’s insurgency efforts since 2003.	Competitive systems of control and meaning form the central pillars of outcompeting an insurgency for the support of contested populations and control over territory and resources.
Transition through campaign phases characterized by guerrilla military and governance activities in its early stages and more hybrid/conventional activities based on relative strengths and vulnerabilities.	Most of the Islamic State movement’s history has been characterized by varying degrees of guerrilla military and governance activities with two fleeting periods of hybrid-conventional activities. The first was when the group called itself the Islamic State of Iraq circa 2006-07. The second and more significant was between 2014 and 2017 across Syria and Iraq.	Identify the insurgency’s politico-military and communicative “signals” of transitions in strategic phases to inform counter and proactive strategies to exploit vulnerabilities and undermine strengths during these periods.
Balance military, propaganda, functional, and structural activities throughout the campaign phases focused on three key goals: achieve functional advantage, impose a functional disadvantage on adversaries, and deploy propaganda as a force multiplier/nullifier.	The periods of the Islamic State’s greatest booms (e.g. 2014-16) and busts (e.g. 2007-08) highlight the challenges associated with finding the ‘right’ balance of action and message to out-compete enemies.	All efforts should be calibrated towards imposing a functional disadvantage on the insurgency and deploy communications to manage the populations expectations about current and future government and civil society functions.
Engage in both top-down political activities designed to coerce/recruit established authorities and bottom-up governance activities to win the support of contested populations.	Through rebuilding (circa 2008) to capturing Mosul in 2014, the Islamic State worked hard to restore relationships with tribes/political leaders as well as cater to community needs.	Complementarily balance support for top-down central government building and bottom-up civil society activities to compound benefits & manage risks.
Centralize propaganda as a force multiplier/nullifier and to project a competitive system of meaning.	Since its founding, the Islamic State movement has always centralized propaganda in its campaign plans.	Prioritize communications plans that <i>manage</i> expectations, <i>amplify</i> the insurgency’s say-do gaps and missteps, and <i>champions</i> government/civil society control & meaning efforts.
Target supportive “decisive minorities” for alliance building and recruitment while intimidating or killing oppositional “decisive minorities”.	Rebuilding post-2007-08, it looked to build jihadi <i>sahwa</i> while prioritizing the killing of so-called traitors over even foreign troops.	Map the insurgency’s targeting of “decisive minorities” in the population increasing security for those against the insurgency and increasing counterterrorism and intelligence pressures on those decisive minorities that support the insurgency.
Build momentum for the campaign through efforts that have cumulative, cyclical, reinforcing effects.	The Islamic State has used assessments of context, enemies, and populations to inform how it prioritizes its targeted and timed politico-military activities to transform the environment in its favor. For example, Zarqawi’s triangular war strategy.	Understanding modern insurgency through the 10 elements can help to align military, governance, and communicative efforts to identify opportunities to build momentum towards undermining the strengths and exploiting the weaknesses of the insurgency.
Co-opt established government institutions to expedite transitions up campaign phases towards greater conventionality.	The speed and sophistication of the Islamic State’s government in Mosul is largely due to co-option.	Engage in efforts to ensure insurgent institutions are dysfunctional especially via support to civil resistance efforts.
Rationalize to expedite transitions down phases towards great unconventionality.	During the collapse of its so-called caliphate in 2017, the Islamic State rationalized its personnel and resources into priority areas.	Maintain politico-military, communicative, and intelligence pressures; exacerbate insurgency vulnerabilities.
Gauge successes and failures by standards relative to both the campaign phase at the time and the adversary’s strengths and weaknesses.	The <i>tamkin</i> threshold is an important benchmark for the Islamic State to assess activities. Above, it focuses on institution building. Below, on “exhaustion”.	Out-compete the insurgency up and down its phases, shifting success metrics accordingly, but always focused on functional dominance and reinforcing a coherent system of meaning to outcome that of the insurgency.

Final Remarks

It is tempting to reflect on the Islamic State's capture of Mosul, and that entire period of its history, as a relic of the past. That for all the musings of scholars and dire warnings from veterans, the Islamic State is, for all intents and purposes, defeated. At worst, it will never again achieve what it did in 2014 because that ultimately was an outlier in its history, the product of great misfortune for Iraqis and Syrians but great fortune for the jihadists. As western nations increasingly posture for "great power competition" and grapple with immensely challenging domestic issues – from the coronavirus pandemic to the rise of domestic extremists – these temptations are even greater. But just as hope is never a good strategy, neither is delusion a solid foundation for making decisions.

The Islamic State was soundly defeated through Syria and Iraq by a coalition of forces. But it was a defeat isolated to the strategic phase in which the group was operating at the time. That is, it was a defeat of the Islamic State's conventional military and governance capabilities. However, as in previous iterations of the group, as it transitions through the phases of its campaign strategy the standards by which "success" and "failure" should be measured fundamentally change. The Islamic State of 2021 is in a comparatively stronger strategic position than at any other point in its history except for the years between 2013 and 2017. For one, the Islamic State has a global presence unmatched at any time in its history affording it strategic depth and an almost bottomless pool of material for its propaganda machine. This study has sought to contribute in a small way to ongoing efforts to understand the Islamic State phenomenon and provide a methodical and empirical foundation for strategic-policy decisions. It will be vital for research and policy focus to remain on this threat and those that it inspires.