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**FROM WINNING TO LOSING: ISIS'S BEHAVIORAL  
CONSISTENCY AND INCONSISTENCY SINCE  
ZARQAWI**

by

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September 2018

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INCONSISTENCY SINCE ZARQAWI**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Terrorist groups in the Middle East continue to pose a challenge to U.S. interests and a threat to the security of the United States and its allies. It is important to understand what factors drive the behavior of these groups and how they adapt to certain challenges. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is a unique terrorist organization that has had an indelible impact on the Middle East and continues to pose a threat to U.S. interests. Examining ISIS's behavior and development over time will help illuminate how certain types of decisions are made in a terrorist organization, what consistencies are present in decision-making, what motivates the behavior of terrorist groups in conflict, and when or why an organization might modify or amend its doctrine to adapt to certain challenges. In the case of ISIS, how the group has adapted or remained consistent in its use and reliance on violence, local support, and apocalyptic ideology is examined. Examining those areas of ISIS's behavior over time help illuminate if and under what conditions the group has been compelled to alter its approach. Findings help us understand what (if any) factors have forced the organization to shift its behavior over time in order to help it advance its stated ultimate goal of a restructured united, global Muslim society ruled by a purely Islamic state system, unadulterated by non-Islamic ideas, morals, or legal concepts.

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# **I. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION**

Terrorist groups in the Middle East continue to pose a challenge to U.S. interests and a threat to the security of the United States and its allies. It is important to understand what factors drive the behavior of these groups and how they adapt to certain challenges. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is a unique terrorist organization that has had an indelible impact on the Middle East and continues to pose a threat to U.S. interests. Examining ISIS's behavior and development over time will help illuminate how certain types of decisions are made in a terrorist organization, what consistencies are present in decision-making, what motivates the behavior of terrorist groups in conflict, and when or why an organization might modify or amend its doctrine to adapt to certain challenges. In the case of ISIS, how the group has adapted or remained consistent in its use and reliance on violence, local support, and apocalyptic ideology is examined. Examining those areas of ISIS's behavior over time will help illuminate if and under what conditions the group has been compelled to alter its approach over time. Findings will help us understand what (if any) factors have forced the organization to shift its behavior over time in order to help it advance its stated ultimate goal of a restructured united, global Muslim society ruled by a purely Islamic state system, unadulterated by non-Islamic ideas, morals, or legal concepts.

## **B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

This thesis will strive to identify the factors that most influence the behavior and decision-making of terrorist organizations, and the challenges that compel ideological and/or behavioral change. The general study of terrorism and terrorist organizations has become an increasingly important topic in academia, yet the behavior of terrorist groups remains an under-studied issue. ISIS is a unique case because its actions and decisions have sometimes been in contradiction to those of more typical terrorist organizations. It has also been among most successful terrorist groups in terms of territorial expansion, grass-roots international support, and brand recognition. An analysis of ISIS's behavior and actions

over its history will provide better insight into what factors drive the organization, as well as help identify when the group has been willing to make compromises. While ISIS may eventually deteriorate as an organization, its overarching ideological goals are likely to continue to attract adherents and supporters, and therefore similar types of organizations are also likely to continue to exist.

Understanding how terrorist organizations behave is not only an academic goal, it also has important implications for U.S. national security strategy and foreign military operations. According to the *U.S. National Security Strategy*, the U.S. seeks to prevent any potential threats to national security such as attacks to the homeland as well as any threat to U.S. interests in the Middle Eastern region to include U.S. allies, resources, military personnel, as well as U.S. citizens abroad. The United States continues to combat present terrorist organizations and strives to deter future organizations from developing and evolving. As the U.S. supports its allies and partners in the region, these organizations—including ISIS—seek to undermine the authority and legitimacy of those partnered governments. ISIS remains one of the most credible threats impacting the stability of the region and has spread beyond the region to affect overall global security to the region, to U.S. interests in the region, as well as overall global security, which suggests that further understanding of this organization is a vital interest.

### **C. LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to David Rapoport, literature on terrorism is abundant but unevenly distributed. He finds that more attention has been focused on the motivations of terrorist groups whereas there has been relatively little attention paid to the study of internal organizational dynamics, especially decision-making and other issues such as counterterrorism policy.<sup>1</sup> The question of what motivations drive terrorist group behavior is a foundational part of the broader literature on terrorism. For example, Martha Crenshaw's 'instrumental model' posits that terrorist organizations with a clear political

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<sup>1</sup> David C. Rapoport, ed. *Inside Terrorist Organizations* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 1.

goal operate in a calculated way to manage costs and rewards of organizational strikes.<sup>2</sup> In this approach, violence (or terrorism) is used as a “means to a political end” that is, to “produce a change in the government’s political position” whereby an organization’s success is determined by their ability to reach their political end state.<sup>3</sup> While this model is simple and easy to understand, it would imply that these groups act primarily on logical thinking. This argument can easily be contradicted, as many terrorist organizations have been known to go against conventional wisdom and logic by making decisions that would seem to be detrimental and costly to the organization, but are somehow supported by its ideology and its overall objective. Crenshaw also discusses an organizational model in which decision-making is determined by its own internal struggles and desires rather than solely the broader political objective.<sup>4</sup> “Terrorist behavior represents the outcome of the internal dynamics of the organization rather than strategic action.”<sup>5</sup>

Similar to Crenshaw’s organizational model, Jacob Shapiro analyzes a variety of terrorist organizations and maintains that they contain a number of same types of internal dilemmas which are inescapable and can impact the decision-making of the organization.<sup>6</sup> This includes issues of bureaucracy, leadership delegation, preference divergence among leaders, and keeping tactics in line with strategy.<sup>7</sup> Shapiro describes a variety of terrorist groups throughout the 19th-21st centuries which look very similar from an organizational perspective throughout different regions including Europe and the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> Most terrorist groups struggle with internal organizational issues involving the right way to manage their people, and many employ the same set of standard managerial tools as any

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<sup>2</sup> Rapoport. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Crenshaw, “Theories of Terrorism: Instrumental and Organizational Approaches,” in *Inside Terrorist Organizations*, ed. David C. Rapoport (London: Frank Cass, 2001) 13–15.

<sup>4</sup> Crenshaw, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Crenshaw, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Shapiro.

<sup>8</sup> Shapiro.

other organization.<sup>9</sup> According to Shapiro, the key to understanding these groups is recognizing their “fundamental organizational dilemma” which is how to manage organizational resources efficiently and be precise in their control as well as their application of violence.<sup>10</sup>

Shapiro argues that this dilemma is nearly inescapable and discusses the challenge of hierarchy and leadership control that is present across different groups. This includes the struggle of delegating duties to a lower leadership level which comes with tradeoffs of security-control and security-efficiency.<sup>11</sup> These organizations must precisely control violence as well as efficiently manage money, however the challenges in trying to achieve this impedes these organization from achieving their objective.<sup>12</sup>

Shapiro discusses the issues of preference divergence between key principle leaders and low-level leaders and the difficulties it creates in target selection and management of resources.<sup>13</sup> The literature does not go further to articulate this impact in terms of political decision-making in terms of the organization’s overall strategic goals; however, this was beyond the scope of what the book was attempting to accomplish. While this evidence is valid in defining the limitations of terrorist organizations, and begins to touch on organizations’ difficulties with tradeoffs and the struggle with compromising control or efficiency in order to achieve a particular political objective. This research will seek to focus on ISIS and its willingness to compromise or balance certain things within the organization in order to achieve its objective.

Although there is a broad literature on terrorism and terrorist groups, scholarship on ISIS is more limited. Currently, there are only a few studies that directly discuss or analyze ISIS’s behavior and decision-making.<sup>14</sup> Some studies examine how terrorist

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<sup>9</sup> Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma*.

<sup>10</sup> Shapiro, 249.

<sup>11</sup> Shapiro.

<sup>12</sup> Shapiro, 250.

<sup>13</sup> Shapiro.

<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of this research, when referring to the ultimate goal or objective of ISIS, the terms “caliphate” and “ultraconservative Islamic State” may be used interchangeably.

organizations more broadly behave, but very little literature examines the willingness of ISIS to modify its use of violence, attempts to gain local support, and its fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecies in order to achieve its objective of an ultraconservative Islamic State. This thesis will seek to fill the gap in the existing literature by examining consistency and shifts in ISIS's behavior in the three aforementioned areas.

There is a vast amount of research defining ISIS as an organization, as a terrorist group, as an insurgency, and even as a quasi-state, however little has been focused specifically on ISIS as a means to understand its behavior, how this organization differs from other organizations in decision-making, or even what compromises the organization is willing to make, if any, to achieve its ultimate objective. The majority of the literature written on ISIS explores the organization through thematic (rather than theoretical) lenses. This includes examinations of the group's type, evolution, ideology, and goals and strategy. Additional literature describes the evolution of ISIS in phases including how the organization and key leaders emerged, and the type of ideology and prophecies that they sought to fulfill. This thesis will explore three main themes which have emerged in the burgeoning study of the organization: its apocalyptic worldview, its political evolution, and its contentious typological categorization.

## **1. Islamic Apocalypticism**

Central to ISIS ideology and perhaps a potential driver of its behavior has been the group's avowed belief in Islamic apocalyptic expectations. Will McCants, for example, has drawn on a number of primary sources such as religious texts and rarely seen letters from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to demonstrate how ISIS's apocalyptic prophecy has shaped its past and what it implies for its future.<sup>15</sup> McCants discusses how apocalyptic messaging played a large part of the Islamic State's propaganda and its ability to gain widespread support, sympathizers, and recruits from across the globe.<sup>16</sup> This is relevant to this thesis in an attempt to understand the organization's behavior and decision-making as it relates

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<sup>15</sup> William Faizi McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> McCants.

to its apocalyptic beliefs. This literature does not discuss how much apocalypticism directly influences the behavior of the organization as a whole or by influencing principle leaders in the organization, or even if certain aspects of this ideology are not always followed or fail to hold true, which is part of the gap this research will seek to fill.

Graeme Wood concurs with McCants in his popular article “What ISIS Really Wants” in terms of how the apocalyptic ideology ties into ISIS’s ultimate goal of establishing the caliphate and its importance in the organization’s journey toward reaching this objective.<sup>17</sup> This is crucial to understanding the organization’s ultimate goal and how it justifies its actions based on these principles, but it does not address specific instances in which the organization’s apocalyptic ideology has influenced its decisions in order to reach these objectives.

Wood also discusses the organization’s desire to create a complete society and emphasizes the importance of the re-instating the caliphate as a “vehicle for salvation” not just a “political entity.”<sup>18</sup> Wood describes their beliefs in apocalyptic “end of days” ideology as well as the “ideological purity” of the organization which makes it predictable and can be useful in attempting to understand its decision-making.<sup>19</sup>

## **2. The Evolution of ISIS**

The evolution of ISIS has been written about in a historical context that breaks its evolution into stages or phases and describes how events within each of those phases have influenced its progression. Brian Fishman dissects the seven-stage “Master Plan” strategy document as written by a senior al-Qaeda leader living under house arrest in Iran.<sup>20</sup> This strategy document is used as a map or blueprint to understand how the declaration of an

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<sup>17</sup> Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what%ADisis%ADreally%ADwants/384980/>.

<sup>18</sup> Wood.

<sup>19</sup> Wood.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).



Islamic State is to be achieved.<sup>21</sup> Fishman analyzes this strategic document by providing a “history of people and the strategic and operational decisions they made to create the Islamic State.”<sup>22</sup> Fishman emphasizes the ideology of Zarqawiism as a “distinct strain of jihadi thought” that was one of the key factors involved in how the organization continued to evolve, which is not discussed in most literature.<sup>23</sup> This account covers the history of the Islamic State broken into seven stages of evolution from the very beginning and provides an outlook for what the future of the organization may look like, providing context for future ISIS plans in its overall master plan or grand strategy. This type of literature is important in understanding the historical context of the organization, the emergence of important leaders, the ideology of Zarqawiism and the use of violence associated with this type of thinking. This literature, however, does not analyze the behavioral patterns of the organization or discuss how these key leaders weighed certain decisions or made compromises in its own doctrine in order to meet its objective.

The work of Craig Whiteside discusses the evolution of ISIS in phases and provides an interpretation of ISIS as “a revolutionary group that has adopted Mao’s protracted warfare to establish an expansive caliphate... [through] its adoption of the doctrine of revolutionary warfare.”<sup>24</sup> Analyzing this organization from a ‘Maoist lens’ is useful in understanding some of the driving principles of the organization and making predictions about how ISIS may react to future challenges and how it may prioritize certain elements in order to achieve its ultimate objective.

According to Whiteside, this organization has evolved through the use of Maoist principles of revolutionary warfare as well as influences from previous Salafi-militant experiences and publications, which have been adopted as doctrine and executed at the operational level.<sup>25</sup> Whiteside claims that the Islamic State has evolved through phases

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<sup>21</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*.

<sup>22</sup> Fishman, xi.

<sup>23</sup> Fishman, 17–18.

<sup>24</sup> Craig Whiteside, “New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016),” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 4 (August 2016):6.

<sup>25</sup> Whiteside, 6.

starting with Phase I—the ‘building’ phase— in which ISIS built up its network of ideological fighters in Iraq and capitalized on the chaos that ensued after the U.S. 2003 invasion of Iraq and the abolishment of the Iraqi government.<sup>26</sup> Once the organization built up its network of fighters, it proceeded to move into Phase II of ‘expansion’ in which this network expanded by building a large organization with a strong bureaucracy that allowed for continuous support of its operations.<sup>27</sup> However, due to the amount of tribal backlash, the Islamic State reverted back to Phase I.<sup>28</sup> This sequence of events demonstrates the importance of local support as well as the implications of failing to achieve local tribal support. This situation would suggest that as ISIS seeks further growth, support from local tribes and the local population will be an important factor in its decision-making—similar to Maoist principles of guerilla warfare and success of an insurgency.

An important aspect of ISIS’s ability to continue evolving through these phases was the “political dysfunction” in Iraq and their leveraging of sectarianism to provoke violence in the region to return to Phase II.<sup>29</sup> As the Islamic State continues its expansion, it moves into Phase III; ‘preserving’ which builds upon Phase II in securing supplies, money, recruitment of foreign fighters, beginning of “decisive campaigns” and establishing the political and environmental conditions necessary to reach their ultimate goal of establishing the caliphate.<sup>30</sup> This research demonstrates the progression of the organization over time and the necessary ingredients that either allowed for or prevented this group from progressing to the next phase. Understanding these aspects of the organization provides insight as to what underlying principles are important to the overall strategy of the organization. Whiteside’s research has shown why these elements are important to the evolution of the organization as a whole and are likely relevant factors in how key leaders prioritize certain elements of its strategy –to include the way in which the strategy is carried out.

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<sup>26</sup> Whiteside, “New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare,” 6.

<sup>27</sup> Whiteside, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Whiteside, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Whiteside, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Whiteside, 9.

### 3. Defining ISIS

There is an exhaustive amount of literature that seeks to define ISIS in terms of political typologies (e.g., terrorist group, insurgency, revolutionary movement). According to the research done by Craig Whiteside, ISIS best fits into the definition of an insurgency because it has mastered many aspects of Mao's concept of revolutionary warfare. In Mao's famous work *On Guerilla Warfare* a revolutionary movement is described as an organized movement that has an ideological component and has a purpose of destroying an existing society and its institutions and implementing a new state structure.<sup>31</sup> In the case of ISIS, this is precisely their goal—to rid Muslim majority states of their current governments and create an ultraconservative, transnational Islamic State—which requires a restructuring of society that is compliant with what they view as the most pure form of Sharia law. Based on its purpose and the fact that it is an organized movement with an Islamic ideological component, ISIS fits the defining characteristics of a revolutionary movement.

Mao also claims that a revolutionary movement will only be terminated when “it has succeeded in displacing the incumbent government or is liquidated.”<sup>32</sup> Mao further explains that “there is very little hope of destroying a revolutionary guerrilla movement after it has survived the first phase and has acquired the sympathetic support of a significant segment of the population.”<sup>33</sup> Based on Whiteside's discussion of ISIS's reversion to Phase I as a result of tribal backlash, it can be said that although the group may not have been destroyed or terminated at that point, a lack of support from local tribes caused significant obstacles for the group's expansion and diminished its progression. These arguments would suggest that local support of the population is a determining factor in any such organization's success and progression, which will likely shape its decisions and the way in which it balances certain aspects of its development toward its ultimate goal. For instance, based on Islamic State archive documents translated by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi that reflect ISIS's administration of education, employment, public services, and

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<sup>31</sup> Zedong Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000) 7.

<sup>32</sup> Mao, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Mao.

religious life as a means of not only remaining embedded within the population but also supporting the population in hopes of furthering the society in which the organization is attempting to establish itself, but also providing basic needs in order to gain some popular support.<sup>34</sup>

The literature on ISIS also describes ways in which it provides its soldiers the necessities in order to succeed through a regimen of indoctrination and training as outlined in Fishman's *Master Plan*. This indoctrination not only provides its members the military education on how to fight, but also educates them on the political goal and creates the will to fight. A fundamental part of any insurgency or revolutionary movement includes certain levels of hostilities but must also have a "clearly defined political goal," according to Mao.<sup>35</sup> Without this ideological component, as well as much-needed political and military leadership, any such movement will likely fail.<sup>36</sup> Mao also discusses the importance of indoctrination and political education of the individuals involved in and supporting the revolutionary movement in order to create an established loyalty and political alertness to the movement's cause.<sup>37</sup> This is especially crucial since the basic element of any war – regardless of weaponry or machinery—is man. If the individual members of ISIS do not hold the political will or desire to fight, this movement will also fail.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The existing literature on terrorism broadly discusses why organizations employ violence, the place of ideology in their political projects, what factors drive their decision-making, the constancy of their long-term strategies, and the many dilemmas they might face. The literature on ISIS discusses the importance of establishing an ultraconservative Islamic State in keeping with its apocalyptic ideology and messaging. It also discusses the evolution of this organization and how and why it came to be. The gap that this thesis will

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<sup>34</sup> Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents," *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi* (blog), January 27, 2015, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents>.

<sup>35</sup> Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> Mao, 43–44.

<sup>37</sup> Mao, 8.

seek to fill lies in the dynamics that shape ISIS's decision-making and the key factors that have influence its behavior. In particular, the organization's approach to three areas—violence, local support, and apocalypticism—will be used to measure the organization's willingness to modify elements of its doctrine in order to achieve its objective. This thesis will examine its use of these variables over time and provide further analysis as to what drives this organization and what factors may be of more importance than others.

#### **D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

This thesis seeks to explain what factors influence how ISIS makes decisions and how much the organization is willing to compromise or modify aspects of its religio-political doctrine in order to achieve its overall objective. Based on the literature discussed, there are three underlying themes that will be used in order to test these hypotheses throughout ISIS's existence and evolution: the utilization of violence as a strategy, leveraging support from the local population and local tribes, and the use of apocalyptic ideology. These themes will be tested in order to determine how influential these factors are in ISIS's decision-making and whether ISIS has modified its behaviors and tactics, its actions in large-scale operations, or its political or religious doctrine and overall strategy.

##### **1. First Hypothesis**

If the use of violence is a vital component in ISIS's approach toward the establishment of a global, united Islamic caliphate, it will remain a consistent factor in the course of the organization's evolution and will be a key factor in its behavior and decision-making. ISIS uses violence as a mechanism to control the population and instill fear in order to create cooperation; therefore, any inconsistencies may be seen as modifications made to its doctrine.

##### **2. Second Hypothesis**

ISIS must also gain support of the population, which may be affected by its use of violence. Therefore, the management of the use of force must be leveraged in order to avoid alienating too much of the population and gain a certain level of local support to establish the caliphate. If support from both local tribes and the general population is vital for the

organization's doctrine toward reaching its objective, it will remain consistent in the organization's decision-making.

### **3. Third Hypothesis**

Apocalyptic ideology is a driving factor of ISIS's existence and its overall purpose. If ISIS's belief in its fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecies is of vital interest to the establishment of a global Islamic caliphate, then it will be consistently demonstrated and emphasized through the organization's rhetoric, behavior, and decision-making.

## **E. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This thesis will compare the behavior of ISIS within three separate eras of its evolution: the Zaraqawi era (2000-2006), the post-Zaraqawi era (2007-2013), and the Caliphate era (2014-Present). The organization's consistency or inconsistency over those eras will be tested by examining its behavior in three areas: the use of violence, its attempt to gain local support, and its application of apocalyptic ideology. To test the hypotheses discussed earlier, particular attention will be paid to any changes or modifications in how these factors are applied by ISIS and any explanation for this variation in behavior.

ISIS's use of violence will be looked at in terms of the amount of violence applied throughout the group's evolution and whether or not the level of violence has changed or remained the same over time. The type of violence will also be examined in order to understand the variation of its methods and proportionality to its targets. The selection of targets will also be a significant factor, particularly as the next factor of gaining local support is examined. Any attempts made by ISIS to discriminate in its use of force or violence in order to meet its objective will also be viewed as important to this research, as it will provide some insight as to what it values or views as more important in particular situations. This will allow for some analysis on how the organization makes certain decisions and whether they can be viewed as stepping stones toward its ultimate objective.

Support from local tribes and the general population as well as the fulfillment of apocalyptic ideology will also be looked at in terms of its relevance on ISIS's decision-making and if this is actually a factor of the organization's religious or political doctrine

that will lead them to the establishment of the caliphate. This research will determine whether or not these factors have remained consistent throughout the evolution of ISIS or if they have varied over time or in different situations. If variation exists, it is likely the organization does not view these as important as other factors and will be disproven as vital to ISIS's decision-making.

Research for this thesis will be comprised of a variety of primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources will include books, scholarly journal articles, Western and Middle East news sources, and other scholarly discourse on relevant topics. Primary sources will include translated administrative documents from ISIS, as well as translated manuals from Islamist strategists. This research will be limited to documents and sources printed in or translated to English.

## **F. THESIS OVERVIEW**

This thesis will comprise five chapters. The first chapter describes the major research question, provides a literature review, and introduces the study's structure. The second, third, and fourth chapters will describe the three eras of ISIS's existence, explaining the political and security contexts, threats to the organization at that time, as well as the key leaders involved in decision-making, and the structure and operations of the organizations that will carry out those decisions. Each of these chapters will closely examine the use of violence, attempts to gain local support, as well as the group's use of apocalyptic rhetoric during that time period. The fifth and final chapter will compare the application of these elements throughout the different eras and determine if these factors remained consistent or if there was some variation over time. The final chapter will also summarize the implications of these findings on ISIS as a terrorist organization and provide some analysis as to whether or not these factors demonstrate a willingness of the organization to modify its doctrine in order to reach its ultimate objective and what this means for further research in terms of ISIS or other terrorist organizations' behavior and decision-making.

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## **II. THE ZARQAWI ERA (2000-2006)**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter focuses on the time period between 2000 and 2006 when Abu Mu'sab al-Zarqawi led al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and guided its actions. This chapter will provide an overview of the political and security context in Iraq in order to understand the environment that allowed AQI to develop as an organization. It will then highlight key decisions made by Zarqawi. Next it will analyze how violence was applied and justified strategically by the group in its attempts to achieve its objectives. Then this chapter will analyze any attempts made by the group to gain local support from the population, local tribes, and other Sunni insurgent groups. Finally, this chapter will analyze the use of apocalyptic ideology throughout this era and determine which of these factors, if any, were essential and remained consistent in the organization's decision-making and subsequent behavior.

The chapter finds that the key drivers of the group's decision-making during this era came from Zarqawi's grand strategy, which was heavily influenced by his personality, his philosophy on the use of excessive violence, and the opportunities created by the political and security situation at the time. Gaining support from the local population, tribal groups, and Sunni insurgent groups was not an influential factor in decision-making throughout this era. AQI made no obvious efforts to gain any support from these groups and, in fact, alienated many Sunni insurgent and tribal groups. Apocalyptic ideology also did not seem to matter much in the organization's decision-making during this era and showed no indications of influencing the organization's behavior outside of recruitment and messaging.

Zarqawi had an end-state in mind and was determined to reach it through the implementation of his grand strategy, which was heavily influenced by his own personality characteristics, and personal philosophy of excessive violence. This grand strategy emphasized the use of brutality toward specific targets that would add value and help fulfill the overall mission. To Zarqawi, the targets that would best serve the organization's agenda were the Shia and the Iraqi government and security forces. Zarqawi did have personal

inclinations toward vengeance and overall brutality that were apparent in the attacks against the Jordanian embassy and hotels, and the brutal beheadings of international civilians but his agenda against the Shia population appeared to me more strategic rather than a personal vendetta. As indicated in Zarqawi's letter to Ayman al-Zawahiri, his emphasis in target selection was against the Shia population—rather than the U.S. forces as Zawahiri insisted. Zarqawi viewed the Shia as the larger threat since he anticipated the United States' eventual departure from Iraq but foresaw a threat in Shia-dominated governance in Iraq. To Zarqawi, eliminating the Shia threat was essential in achieving his objective. Even though Zarqawi's personal influence played a large role in the development and implementation of the organization's strategy, many of his decisions were based on the strategic impact these targets were believed to have which would further the organization's objective.

Much of AQI's application of violence was heavily influenced by Zarqawi's brutal nature, his personal inclinations toward vengeance, and opportunism. Zarqawi developed an excessively violent ideology and culture among his leaders that remained within the organization even after Zarqawi's death. Zarqawi's strategy of utilizing violence as a means to punish, coerce, and gain power was applied during a political security crisis of the time, which allowed his organization to take advantage of the current situation in order to achieve the objective. Zarqawi's driven, yet somewhat impatient and brutal nature, his instrumental use of the current political security situation in Iraq, and his utilization of lessons learned from past jihadist mistakes allowed him to devise a grand strategy in order to establish the caliphate.

During this era, forming alliances with local tribes and Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq was not a significant part of the organization's grand strategy and did not force AQI to limit its use of violence in any way. This became a strong point of dissent between Zarqawi and al-Qaeda Central leadership in Afghanistan. Regardless of the criticisms or advice from other leaders, Zarqawi continued his strategic use of violence indiscriminately, which alienated a significant number of Sunni insurgents and tribesmen. In Zarqawi's eyes, forming alliances and working with local tribes and Sunni insurgent groups was not necessary and chose not to limit the group's use of violence.

Additionally, apocalyptic ideology was not initially central to AQI but rather emerged gradually as a method of recruitment campaigns and messaging. From 2000 to 2006, apocalypticism was not a recognizable theme until Zarqawi used pieces of the ideology in a video message. He described the recent events of the U.S. invasion, the partnerships with the Shia, as well as the instability and significant upheaval in the country as the approaching of the “End of Days” which would be hailed by the re-establishment of the caliphate. According to the prophecies, the caliphate will be the place to fight for the Muslim savior, the Mahdi, who will return at the Final Hour. Based on available evidence, it is difficult to determine if Zarqawi had a genuine belief in the fulfillment of the apocalyptic prophecies or if apocalypticism was simply a convenient ideology he used to explain the chaos at the time and leverage support for furthering AQI’s objectives and establishing the caliphate.

## **B. POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONTEXT**

Upon U.S. intervention into Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent removal of the Ba’athist government, the state of Iraq was left ungoverned, vulnerable to security threats, and subject to severe economic and social turmoil. Saddam Hussein had had a tight grip on the Iraqi social and state apparatus for the previous 35 years and was removed within a matter of only three weeks. This left the state at a stand-still, halted all state institutions, economic activity, and public services.<sup>38</sup> Process of removing all Ba’ath party members from state employment, known as de-Ba’athification, and subsequent dissolution of the Iraqi army and security services forced 500,000 people to become instantly unemployed.<sup>39</sup> Particularly after Saddam Hussein’s buildup and expansion of the military throughout the Iran-Iraq war and the following Gulf War, the de-Ba’athification law left highly trained military operators and officers without work and with limited skills for future employment. Their unemployment and effective blacklisting by the Coalition Provisional Authority extended the impact of de-Ba’athification beyond the former Ba’ath Party members and

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<sup>38</sup> Adeed Dawisha, “The Long and Winding Road to Iraqi Democracy,” *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 03 (September 2010): 879, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710001313>.

<sup>39</sup> Bassam Yousif, “Economic Restructuring in Iraq: Intended and Unintended Consequences,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 41, no. 8 (March 2007): 49.

civil servants to their families, affecting approximately 10% of the population: 2.4 million people.<sup>40</sup>

The removal of the security apparatus that maintained order throughout the state and the U.S. and coalition's inability to provide security to local population due to sheer numbers, created a reduced security capability and a window of opportunity for local Islamist militant organization recruitment efforts.<sup>41</sup> As one former Iraqi soldier stated, "I haven't been working for the last two weeks. If I stay like this for another week, my family will starve; and if someone comes with \$50 and asks me to toss a grenade at the Americans, I'll do it with pleasure."<sup>42</sup> Many of the displaced military and security forces had become riddled with financial insecurity and only possessed skills in firearms handling and military operations—skills that would be useful to militant insurgent organizations.<sup>43</sup>

The destruction of state institutions as a result of the U.S.-led invasion and the de-Ba'athification policy of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq fueled the social turmoil and triggered a steadily growing sectarian and political divide between Arab Sunnis, who largely backed the former Baathist government, and Shia Muslims, who were seen as the main beneficiaries of the post-Baathist reforms.<sup>44</sup> In a climate such as this, where security conditions are constantly changing, identity-based groups are given more opportunity to develop and pursue political and material efforts on their own rather than await the workings of a formal state system;<sup>45</sup> AQI took advantage of this opportunity.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Yousif, 51.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew J. Godwin, "Political Inclusion in Unstable Contexts: Muqtada Al-Sadr and Iraq's Sadrist Movement," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5, no. 3 (September 2012): 454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2012.695462>.

<sup>42</sup> Yousif, "Economic Restructuring in Iraq: Intended and Unintended Consequences," 51.

<sup>43</sup> Godwin, "Political Inclusion in Unstable Contexts," 454.

<sup>44</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Godwin, "Political Inclusion in Unstable Contexts," 4454.

<sup>46</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 63.

### C. KEY LEADERSHIP IN DECISION-MAKING

In the midst of this political upheaval, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi was able to establish a following of individuals who he would command as the “Jordanian founder and emir of AQI and godfather of the Islamic State.”<sup>47</sup> Prior to his stint in Iraq, Zarqawi had fought with the Afghan mujahedeen against the Soviets and continued to preach the call to Islam after the war with the help of his mentor, the jihadist cleric, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. The two were sent to prison after a failed attack designed to thwart the Jordanian-Israeli peace agreement in 1994. When Zarqawi and Maqdisi were released from prison, Zarqawi traveled back to Afghanistan and began his own training camp in Herat with the institutional and financial support from al-Qaeda, which was “the world’s most prominent jihadi group” at the time.<sup>48</sup>

Al-Maqdisi, was influential in developing Zarqawi’s view of Islam and Sharia law, which influenced the foundational objectives of AQI. Maqdisi was known as “one of the world’s most prominent jihadi ideologues” and worked with Zarqawi in proselytizing the Salafi-Jihadist message and criticizing the Jordanian government for its relations with Israel.<sup>49</sup> The two worked closely together until they began to diverge during their time in prison. Maqdisi took a more peaceful, vocal role in criticizing the Jordanian monarchy; Zarqawi was looking for a fight.

Zarqawi’s experience in the Jordanian prison likely left deep scars on his character.<sup>50</sup> He had been kept in solitary confinement for over an eight-month period, and likely endured extensive physical and psychological torture. During that experience, he seemed to undergo a political and religious transformation. He eventually moved away from being a follower of Maqdisi to becoming a feared leader within the prison walls.<sup>51</sup> After Zarqawi was released from prison and began operating his own training camp in

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<sup>47</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan* 7.

<sup>48</sup> Fishman, 19.

<sup>49</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 54.

<sup>50</sup> Gerges, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2016) 23.

Afghanistan he was able to learn the responsibilities of running an organization and demonstrate his ability to command an organization of fighters. Zarqawi's responsibilities of command at his training camp in Herat, the influence of his mentor, his experience in prison, coupled with his experience in war against the Soviets all molded his rough character that laid the foundation for AQI.<sup>52</sup>

During 1999–2006, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda Central's leadership, partnered with Zarqawi and provided funding for his camp in Herat allowing him autonomy in how he commanded it. Zawahiri was al-Qaeda's second-in-command on 9/11 was named emir of al-Qaeda after Osama bin Laden's death. With a common objective of uniting Muslims globally through a "transnational caliphate" and enforcing Sharia law senior al-Qaeda leaders disagreed on what the implementation looked like.<sup>53</sup> Clashes among leadership created divisions in the Levantine jihadi network which provided an opportunity for Zarqawi to re-build those networks and further the objective in a region where al-Qaeda had been historically weak.<sup>54</sup> After 1999, Zarqawi and bin Laden realized the dissimilarities in their visions of how to establish the caliphate, yet the two put aside their differences and Zarqawi pledged allegiance to bin Laden in 2004.<sup>55</sup> Al-Qaeda leadership would continue to have an influence in the development of the organization in the coming years, although the level of influence would change over time.

## **D. STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS**

### **1. Application of Violence**

Zarqawi's role was significant in the development of AQI, and its adherence to a brutally violent ideology, later became to be known as "Zarqawiism" by Western scholars. Followers of Zarqawi continued to carry out his philosophy of brutality even after his death, known as Zarqawiists. The critical principle of Zarqawiism uses religious rhetoric to justify

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<sup>52</sup> Warrick, 70.

<sup>53</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 13–15.

<sup>54</sup> Fishman, 13–15.

<sup>55</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 75.

extreme violence in order to establish an austere form of puritanical Salafist Islam.<sup>56</sup> Zarqawi did not believe any Muslim-majority state was a legitimate Islamic state since no government was operating wholly under sharia law. He argued that all governments had strayed away from God’s law by either following man-made laws and governance, or by directly going against God’s law. Even the government of Saudi Arabia, which has operated under sharia, has strayed away by allying with the United States and allowing U.S. forces on their soil during the 1991 Gulf war. Zarqawi sought to re-establish the caliphate because he saw the caliphate as the only legitimate authority of the Muslim world that would adhere to his implementation of sharia law.

According to Zarqawi’s, extremely narrow vision of what it means to be a “true” Muslim, an individual cannot call himself a true Muslim without thoroughly carrying out Sharia Law. Zarqawi’s mentor, Maqdisi, developed a political ideology based on the concept of *al-wal’a w’al bara’a*, the notion that Muslims should remain loyal to Islam and disavow everything that contradicts Islamic belief, which rejects all political leaders who do not enforce his version of Sharia law.<sup>57</sup> Anyone who acts outside of this law—particularly any supporters of manmade government, or anyone who supports or aids these governments—is considered a nonbeliever. Zarqawi’s narrow definition of a “true” Muslim considered a great majority of the Muslim world to be apostates deserving death and enforced brutal tactics as a justified means to implement Sharia law and establish the caliphate.<sup>58</sup> These were important concepts that were implemented within the organization and carried out by its leaders, thus having a direct impact on decision-making of who is deserving of death.

An underlying assumption within Zarqawiism is the notion that violence and killing of nonbelievers is justified by the Quran<sup>59</sup> and while killing in the name of God seems baffling to many— Muslims and non-Muslims—knowing the ins and outs of Islam, the

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<sup>56</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 50.

<sup>57</sup> Fishman, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Fishman, 60.

<sup>59</sup> Fishman, 62.

Quran, or the hadith was not a requirement for Zarqawi or his soldiers.<sup>60</sup> Soldiers were trained based on Zarqawi's understandings and interpretations of Islam and acted as he commanded. One of Zarqawi's mentors and leader of the Mujahideen Army, Abu Zahra al-Issawi a Salafist jihadist armed group in Iraq, described Zarqawi's behavior of sanctioning killing against Muslims "based on false grounds and an overzealous twisting of the Islamic doctrine." Al-Issawi claims Zarqawi used distorted interpretations of the Sunna in order to legitimize his acts of terror in Iraq.<sup>61</sup> Zarqawi was not well educated, had limited knowledge in classical Arabic, and learned the Quran through secondhand interpretation from Salafi-jihadists who likely indoctrinated their ideological interpretations upon Zarqawi.<sup>62</sup>

The manifestos of jihadist strategists played a strong influence in the organization's grand strategy and furthered the justification for eliminating nonbelievers. These documents provided guidance from past jihadists on violence aligned with ideology which was used by many jihadi leaders including Zarqawi.<sup>63</sup> *The Management of Savagery* manifesto written under the pseudonym Abu Bakr Naji provides direction for the establishment of an Islamic State and discusses operational questions of leadership, training programs, target selection, and, essential elements of governance.<sup>64</sup> Zarqawi utilized this document during its circulation in the early 2000s as a justification for excommunicating groups of people. The seven stage master plan was another document used as a roadmap of the organization's strategy and progression in order to reestablish the caliphate, which was a joint effort between Zarqawi and Sayf al-Adl—al-Qaeda's feared security chief, played a role in.<sup>65</sup> Finally, the *Introduction to the Jurisprudence of Jihad* by Abu Abdullah al-Muhajjer, which calls on Salafi-jihadists to establish a purely unified

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<sup>60</sup> Fishman, 150.

<sup>61</sup> Fishman.

<sup>62</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 35.

<sup>63</sup> Gerges, 35.

<sup>64</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 38.

<sup>65</sup> Fishman, 13.



Islamic state by any means necessary, provides further guidance and influenced key leaders such as Zarqawi in applying his strategy of violence in order to establish the caliphate.

The level of violence and brutality was further fueled by the leftover Ba'athist regime leaders who joined Zarqawi's ranks since they were already familiar with such tactics during their work under Saddam Hussein.<sup>66</sup> Zarqawi's developing organization of AQI was able to channel the tools of repression used by the Ba'athist regime and the country's bitter legacy of violence into supporting his own cause/vision.<sup>67</sup> Zarqawi's men were able to bring many Ba'athists left without work, retirement pension, or any lingering of future career opportunities to his cause and continue to perpetuate the "brutal tactics of the Ba'athist regime" which demonstrated its intolerance for dissent and used terror to silence the opposition.<sup>68</sup> Ba'ath party members who were no longer able to serve in the Iraqi government found a perfect niche within Zarqawi's growing organization at the time of the U.S. invasion.<sup>69</sup>

In the minds of key leadership, viciousness was seen as a necessary ingredient for victory, and the end-state of establishing the Islamic state justified the means of brutality that was used to get there. The history of success of regimes gaining power in the Middle East, such as the Mongols, the Israelites, the Saud family, as a product of viciousness and violence further justified the claim that violence actually works.<sup>70</sup> Brutality was not incompatible with establishing a caliphate and was a justified means to reach their desired end-state.<sup>71</sup>

AQI's target selection and methods of violence were either designed to fit into the overall grand strategy, were targets of opportunity that added value to the strategy, or were acts of personal vengeance that were made to fit into that grand strategy. Based on the level

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<sup>66</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 9.

<sup>67</sup> Gerges, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Gerges, 9.

<sup>69</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 40.

<sup>70</sup> Gerges, 55.

<sup>71</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 150.

of Zarqawi's influence, the attacks carried out by AQI were primarily targets selected by Zarqawi himself and were likely influenced by his personality and history. Many of the attacks carried out in the early years of AQI were a variety of car bombs and suicide bomb attacks that killed hundreds of innocent civilians in both Jordan and Iraq, and many Shia Muslims. Zarqawi selected targets that hurt the Jordanian and U.S. governments, likely as an effort to seek revenge. He chose targets directed at Shia Muslims, however, as an effort to stir up a sectarian conflict and ignite Sunni mobilization to join AQI. Other targets selected appeared to be targets of opportunity, such as kidnappings of foreigners that could have resulted in financial rewards, beheadings that were meant to gain attention and provoke fear, and random indiscriminate killings to eliminate any opposition and gain control or exert greater influence.

Zarqawi considered Shia Muslims to be apostates and therefore a legitimate target of his group's attacks. He viewed the Shia as a threat to the establishment of the caliphate that needed to be violently purged from the Islamic fold. In a memo written by Zarqawi to al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, Zarqawi demonstrates his genocidal anti-Shia ideology by depicting the Shia as an existential threat that needed to be exterminated.<sup>72</sup> He accused the Shias of having "befriended and supported the Americans and stood in their ranks against the mujahidin" and used Quranic scriptures to justify the murdering of Shia Muslims.<sup>73</sup> Through the targeted and indiscriminate attacks on Shiites, Zarqawi sought to create a deep sectarian divide that would force Sunni insurgents to align with him and help further his cause. It is unclear from this research if Zarqawi actually held a deep, personal hatred for Shias or if this was a strategic move that would be instrumental in achieving his ultimate objective. Zarqawi sought bloodshed by killing Shia political and religious leaders until a sectarian war began.<sup>74</sup> In order to achieve the establishment of an Islamic State, Zarqawi needed to gain control over Sunni groups by eliminating tribal loyalty and Iraqi nationalism and replace them with an "ideological

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<sup>72</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 81.

<sup>73</sup> Gerges, 81.

<sup>74</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 47.

commitment to jihadi-Salafi ideological goals.”<sup>75</sup> Zarqawi’s goal was to create a Sunni-Shia civil war that was big enough and bloody enough to mobilize Sunnis and harden their attitudes toward Iraqi Shia. He hoped this would help gain the support of Sunnis for AQI by demonstrating that “only jihadist extremism and brutality could keep Sunnis safe.”<sup>76</sup> Targeting Shia was a strategy used by Zarqawi as a means to seize the opportunity provided by the political discord at the time and achieve his desired end state.

Zarqawi’s disdain for the Jordanian government that imprisoned him and his desire for revenge heavily influenced his target selection as he considered all “policemen, judges, and government members of all ranks” as supporters of the regime and henceforth targets for AQI.<sup>77</sup> Zarqawi also justified the excommunication and killing of any policeman tasked by the Americans to fight the mujahedeen. Based on the group’s broad definition of nonbelievers and potential targets, the fact that Jordan is chosen above any other nation seems to be a target selection more closely aligned with personal vendetta rather than strategic objective. The Jordanian government that imprisoned him, and tortured him deepened his hatred and resentment toward the government and all those who worked for it, thereby explaining Zarqawi’s desire for revenge and the organization’s actions since Zarqawi played a heavy role in the group’s decision-making. In August 2003—several months after the U.S. invasion into Iraq—Zarqawi’s organization executed a car bombing attack at the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad that left at least 17 dead and many more injured.<sup>78</sup> Instead of directing an attack at the Americans occupying Iraq at the time—who were considered the “far enemy” that supported the local governments that undermine jihadi efforts, and were now easier, more proximate targets—Zarqawi directed his attack at the government that allowed the abuse and torture he endured in prison, and the intelligence services that restricted his freedom and harassed Zarqawi and his mother when

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<sup>75</sup> Brian Fishman, “Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned From Inside Al-Qa`ida in Iraq,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, March 2009), 2.

<sup>76</sup> Fishman, “Dysfunction and Decline,” 2.

<sup>77</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 55.

<sup>78</sup> Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*, 106.

attempting to leave Jordan, among many other grievances.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, in November 2005, the near-simultaneous attacks that took place at three main hotels in Amman, Jordan killed Jordanian citizens; families celebrating weddings; innocent people who have never harmed Zarqawi or any part of his organization.<sup>80</sup> Zarqawi later claimed that these attacks were targeted at U.S. and Israeli intelligence officials who were occupying these hotels but it is unclear if this was his actual intent or was a fabrication that took place as a means to inflict greater death and destruction against the Jordanian state that had caused him so much pain. Zarqawi's target selection appears to have been influenced by his own personal hatred and resentment rather than simply being a stepping-stone toward the establishment of an Islamic state.

The U.S. government was subjected to more indirect attacks which were designed to attrite their resources, draw out a long, complex conflict while also deterring other nations from entering the conflict to support. AQI directed attacks toward a UN diplomat, the UN headquarters in Baghdad, a luxury hotel in Baghdad, the Headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross and four police stations across Baghdad which left up to 70 dead and hundreds more wounded. These attacks appeared to have more strategic implications in terms of forcing out nongovernmental organizations and discouraging anyone from opening an embassy in Iraq—leaving Americans isolated and with little support.<sup>81</sup> This type of strategy appears to be more in line with the teachings of these jihadi manifestos that explain the need for a war of attrition in order wear down the enemy's resources and draw out their efforts into a long and painful conflict.<sup>82</sup>

A final target group of Zarqawi's organization was a combination of ostensibly random individuals that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time but were used as a mechanism for spreading fear, gaining legitimacy and financial resources, and also

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<sup>79</sup> Warrick, 202.

<sup>80</sup> Warrick, 5.

<sup>81</sup> Warrick, 113.

<sup>82</sup> Abu Bakr Naji, *Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma Will Pass*, trans. William McCants (Boston, MA: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University), 2006.

detering outsiders from entering AQI's declared territory. These individuals were imprisoned, tortured, held for ransom, or even beheaded. The beheading of American business entrepreneur Nicholas Berg was an attack carried out solely because he was American and in the wrong place at the wrong time. Berg served no strategic purpose, was not a prominent figure within the U.S. political system, and was not attempting to combat the efforts of AQI or diminish its credibility in any way or speak out against the Islamic faith. Many others suffered a similar fate; some were even tortured until their ultimate execution while awaiting a potential ransom to be paid from their respective country; if a country did not pay, then that individual was executed.<sup>83</sup> This particular aspect of the organization's behavior is interesting in that its targets appear to be somewhat random, although further research is required. These targets served no strategic purpose other than to demonstrate the group's desire for financial gain and its willingness to use extreme brutality indiscriminately.

Zarqawi was the primary influence in the organization's application of violence during this period. Zarqawi's extreme personality shaped by his traumatic experiences in prison, coupled with his elementary understanding and interpretation of Islam; the guidance provided by jihadi manifestos; the leftover Ba'athist brutality measures; and the historical examples that demonstrate the effectiveness of violence, heavily influenced Zarqawi personally and his extremely violent operational approach. That approach was integrated into the organization's grand strategy as a means of accomplishing the objective of establishing an Islamic caliphate.

## **2. Attempts to Gain Support**

AQI was unsuccessful in gaining support from the local population and local tribesmen and eventually declared them as targets along with Sunni insurgents and Iraqi nationalists due to the significant tension that existed, mainly due to AQI's attacks on innocent civilians and methods of attempting to gain control. AQI attempted to exert control and impose its will over tribal areas in Iraq while making no attempts at concessions

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<sup>83</sup> Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*, 158.

or any type of coordination with the tribal leaders or Sunni insurgent organizations.<sup>84</sup> A vast number of Sunni insurgents were reluctant to forego their nationalist or tribal ideologies and submit to an organization responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent Iraqis. While AQI was able to sway the allegiance of some local insurgents through financial rewards for successful killings, local tribes became fed up with AQI and even though many of their fighters were Iraqis they were considered a largely foreign force that local insurgents were not easily going to submit to.<sup>85</sup> At this point in the development of Zarqawi's organization it was clear that gaining support from the local population and the local tribes were not a priority—or at least not one that exceeded the organization's need for clearly identifying its desire and willingness to use brutal tactics in order to gain control or power.

### **3. Apocalypticism**

During the early years of AQI and Zarqawi, the ideology of apocalypticism did not appear to be a significant driving factor in decision-making during this time frame, nor did it appear to be the foundation on which the organization was built upon but rather a messaging tool that was utilized along the way. The only mention of apocalyptic ideology is discussed closer to the end of this timeframe when Zarqawi begins his videotape messaging and attempts to appeal to new recruits claiming that the end of days is approaching and it is time to support the cause of establishing the caliphate. There were no recognized use of apocalypticism within the aforementioned jihadist manifestos, nor was it apparent in any type of correspondence from Zarqawi. This ideology did not appear to be a large priority of Zarqawi, which could have played a role in its limited impact since he had such a significant influence in the organization's foundation and development. Research has shown that this became a larger phenomenon later on in the organization's evolution after Zarqawi's death, which will be discussed in later chapters. Apocalypticism, therefore, appears to be a messaging maneuver rather than a foundational belief and was not a significant factor in the decision-making of the organization.

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<sup>84</sup> Fishman, "Dysfunction and Decline," 2.

<sup>85</sup> Fishman, 2.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

AQI's decision-making was largely driven by their grand strategy, which was driven by a key individual—Abu Mu'sab al-Zarqawi. His personal inclination toward extreme violence and acts of vengeance, and the opportunities created by the political situation at the time were key factors in developing the organization's strategy. Violence loosely justified by Islamic precedent and law superseded the need to gain local support or the emphasis of apocalyptic ideology. AQI clashed with local tribes and other Sunni insurgent organizations because of their brutal tactics and attacks against Iraqi civilians, yet the organization was not willing to compromise or reduce their level of violence during this era. Additionally, the use of apocalyptic scriptures was never used as a foundation or key driver of decision-making at this time. The only demonstration of apocalypticism was used in the context of recruitment messaging rather than being an integral part of the group's grand strategy. Therefore, the implementation of violence as part of the group's grand strategy remained a consistent priority throughout this era, while attempts to gain support and apocalyptic ideology were not prioritized.

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### III. THE POST-ZARQAWI ERA (2006-2013)

#### A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the time period after the death of Zarqawi in which AQI underwent a leadership transition, persevered through the tribal Awakening backlash, and established the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). This chapter will first describe the political environment and security situation in Iraq that will impact the organization's development and setbacks. Next, this chapter will discuss the key leaders involved in decision-making while highlighting the significance of individual leadership during this era, particularly the transition from a charismatic leader such as Zarqawi to the legal-rational leadership of Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar. Next, this chapter will analyze the excessive use of violence as part of the organization's strategy and the change in its approach in dealing with local tribes and Sunni insurgents. Finally, this chapter will discuss apocalypticism during this time period and the limited influence it had in leadership decision-making as part of the organization's grand strategy.

This chapter finds that the adaptability of the individual leadership shaped the organization's strategy differently than the previous era, thus demonstrating the significance of the individual leaders' influence in the organization. The organization's grand strategy was centralized around the use of violence; however, limiting its use of excessive violence in order to avoid further alienation from the local Sunni tribes and insurgent groups was a larger motivator during this time period. ISI sought to consolidate the base of their organization by coercing and co-opting Sunni militants, while also offering various incentives.<sup>86</sup> Especially after feeling the significant backlash of the Awakening Council, ISI learned how to balance excessive violence with mobilizing support in order to gain the Sunni baseline required for expansion.<sup>87</sup> ISI leaders offered forgiveness to these tribal leaders who had previously fought against them with the U.S. and coalition forces

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<sup>86</sup> Craig Whiteside, "The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (September 2, 2016): 743–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208287>.

<sup>87</sup> Whiteside, 743–76.

while also targeting rival Sunni Islamist groups who would interfere with ISI's ability to grow and expand.<sup>88</sup> This is one example in which the organization modified its doctrine in order to achieve its objective.

## **B. POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONTEXT**

Chaos and disorder continued during the U.S. occupation in Iraq and the re-building of the Iraqi government and security forces. The predominantly Shia leadership in Iraq, their continued efforts of consolidating power, the sectarian-viewed policies, and the forced displacement of citizens based on religious affiliation fueled the sectarian polarization in Iraq during this era.<sup>89</sup> AQI furthered this sectarian climate by leveraging the political grievances created as a result of the government's displacement of Sunni communities and using that as a tool to unite with Sunni groups in order to grow and further their cause. The opportunities created by the political and security environment allowed AQI to capitalize on perceived acts of retaliation from the government toward Sunnis in addition to the attacks from Shia insurgent groups. These circumstances allowed AQI to re-brand its organization, build alliances and leverage partnerships in order to establish itself as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

As this organization began to grow, however, so did its opposition. ISI had alienated a significant number of Sunni tribes and insurgent nationalist by attempting to take over areas that these groups had maintained control for several years. More significantly, ISI's continuous attacks against Iraqi civilians fueled hatred and resentment against this organization, creating more individuals willing to fight against them. This context eventually led to the creation of the Awakening Council—also known as the Sahwa forces—which was a compilation of Sunni tribes and many other resistance groups who were fed up with ISI and began liaising with the U.S. and coalition forces in order to combat this organization that was gaining too much power. The Sahwa forces worked with U.S. and coalition forces to diminish the effectiveness of ISI's operations in Iraq.

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<sup>88</sup> Whiteside, 743–76.

<sup>89</sup> Saad N. Jawad, "The Iraqi Constitution: Structural Flaws and Political Implications," *LSE Middle East Centre* 01, (November 2013).

The impact of the Sahwa forces was a tremendous blow to ISI that significantly reduced the territory and resources of the organization forcing its withdrawal in many areas. However, once the primarily Sunni Sahwa forces were placed under Iraqi government authorities in 2008 rather than under U.S. control, their effectiveness diminished over a short time. Iraq's prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, managed to consolidate his political power and control over a vast number of state institutions—which included the armed forces reporting to the Office of the Prime Minister.<sup>90</sup> Maliki did not provide substantial support to the primarily Sunni Sahwa forces, possibly to limit the potential of this organization gaining too much strength and rising against the government.<sup>91</sup> When Iraqi authorities began persecuting and arresting leaders and members of the previously U.S.-backed Sahwa forces, this fueled the government's anti-Sunni narrative and demonstrated their lack of support for these forces. This direct targeting of Sunnis coupled with the forced displacement of Sunnis was seen as sectarian retaliation on the part of the government, creating larger numbers of people frustrated with the Iraqi government without the support of the coalition forces to compensate/support. Although, the Sahwa forces were never intended to be a long-term solution to the ISI problem, their effectiveness had run its course over a short period of time but the vicious cycle of “sectarian polarization” continued.<sup>92</sup>

ISI was able to recover from the backlash of the Sahwa forces by admitting past mistakes, forming partnerships and alliances, while capitalizing on the grievances created by the predominantly Shia government. “Further insight after conversations with Iraqi tribal leaders revealed that many of those who have joined ISI have done so as a means to resist the Shia-dominated regime, or to turn against the regime it previously supported rather than purely its Islamist ideology.”<sup>93</sup> ISI became the only recognizable alternative to

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<sup>90</sup> Douglass Ollivant, “Countering the New Orthodoxy: Reinterpreting Counterinsurgency in Iraq,” *New America Foundation* (June 2011).

<sup>91</sup> Ollivant.

<sup>92</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 13.

<sup>93</sup> Gerges, 14.

a “broken and corrupt” regime.<sup>94</sup> After the U.S. withdrawal, some Sunnis were convinced that the government would seize and sentence them, especially after a tribal leader from the Sahwa forces was arrested by Iraqi government officials and sentenced to death.<sup>95</sup> This allowed the opportunity for ISI to capitalize on these grievances and attract disenchanted Sunnis to its organization. Through these efforts, ISI continued to expand and re-built relationships with local Sunni insurgents and tribes growing both in force numbers and overall strength.

The effects of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings and the devolution of the Syrian civil war also created an opportunity for ISI to expand and develop a network in Syria known as Jabat al-Nusra (JaN).<sup>96</sup> When Baghdadi sought to reveal the true identity of JaN as an extension of ISI and merge the two networks together the original commanders sent to Syria to set up the organization, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, refused. This created some internal conflict within the organization, presented certain limitations, and created divergence within the organization. This, however, did not prevent the organization from its continued growth and ultimate re-establishment of the caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdad in 2014, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **C. KEY LEADERS IN DECISION-MAKING**

The transition from a charismatic leader such as Zarqawi to legal-rational style leaders, such as Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar, had a significant impact on decision-making and the subsequent behavior of the organization. Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri, commonly known as Abu Hamzah al-Muhajjer, were the most influential leaders throughout this era as appointed emir, and defense minister respectively after Zarqawi’s death.<sup>97</sup> After their deaths in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was named emir of the organization and expanded the organization into Syria, declaring the name the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The significant part of Baghdadi’s influence to the organization

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<sup>94</sup> Gerges, 22.

<sup>95</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 145.

<sup>96</sup> Fishman, 145.

<sup>97</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 93.

will be discussed in the next chapter. Abu Umar was a good candidate as emir of ISI since he was Iraqi-born and AQ Central leaders sought to reduce the reputation of ISI being a foreign-born organization seeking to intrude into the Iraqi territory. Abu Hamzah appeared to have greater presence in the organization as defense minister based on the amount of sources available on the correspondence of him—however his instructions are assumed to be aligned with that of Abu Umar as both leaders seem to have had a similar leadership style.

The transition that took place after Zarqawi’s death emphasized the significance of individual leadership to the organization. The differences in leadership style between Zarqawi and Abu Hamzah affected the implementation and modification of the organization’s strategy, relationships within the organization, as well as interactions with other Sunni organizations. Zarqawi was a charismatic leader who went against the grain, developed and implemented new strategies and ideologies and rallied supporters to carry out his vision.<sup>98</sup> Zarqawi was able to inspire others with his vision of establishing the caliphate. Abu Umar and Abu Hamzah’s leadership fit the legal-rational authority description, which was demonstrated in their decision-making. These leaders focused on those actions that would lead to the success of the organization achieving its ultimate objective rather than bringing forth new and innovative ideas and strategies and rallying support.

## **D. STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS**

### **1. Application of Violence**

Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar’s leadership style influenced the organization’s application of violence and target selection. While Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar sought to continue the work Zarqawi started and preserve this following, these leaders made decisions that would lead to the growth and expansion of the organization’s power and influence but were not always in keeping with Zarqawi’s strategy. Shortly after Abu

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<sup>98</sup> Jennifer L. Epley, “Weber’s Theory of Charismatic Leadership: The Case of Muslim Leaders in Contemporary Indonesian Politics,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 5, no. 7 (July 2015).

Hamzah came into his leadership role in September 2006 he called for an increase of indiscriminate violence against Americans and Shia Muslims in his 15 day strategy.<sup>99</sup> Abu Hamzah tried walking a fine line between Zarqawiism and allegiance to al-Qaeda central leadership in order to leverage both of those resources for the sake of the organization. If the violence continued to subside after Abu Hamzah came into AQI leadership, he may be viewed as weak and unfit as this group's leader and this message was a perfect opportunity to inspire confidence.<sup>100</sup> If he strayed too far away from the Zarqawiist ideology he would likely have lost the support of the remaining Zarqawiists; yet he also did not want to completely break ties with AQ leadership—especially given his history with Aymen al-Zawahiri as well as the networks and resources to gain from this organization. Abu Hamzah's call for attacks against the Americans was likely an appeal to AQ Central leadership and not necessarily part of his grandiose vision or strategy for the organization.<sup>101</sup> This call for violence could have also been an effort to determine individuals' commitment to the cause and weed out those who were less committed. Either way, this decision appeared to be more calculated rather than a rash, vengeful type of decision and the mark of a legal-rational type leader.

Shortly after voicing his 15 day strategy and putting out a call for violence, Abu Hamzah offered amnesty to the Sunni tribes who had previously fought against AQI and attempted to reconcile those relationships with Sunni tribes and insurgent groups.<sup>102</sup> This call for unity and forgiveness was very different than the organization's implementation of a strict takfiri ideology against anyone who disagreed with its strategy and justified killing many Sunnis—including tribal and insurgent leaders.<sup>103</sup> Yet based on Abu Hamzah's announcement, if these tribal leaders were willing to admit their mistakes and join ranks with AQI they would be forgiven. This was a unique inflection point in the organization's

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<sup>99</sup> Brian Fishman, "Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir's 15-Day Strategy" (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point), 2006.

<sup>100</sup> Fishman.

<sup>101</sup> Fishman.

<sup>102</sup> Gerges, 101.

<sup>103</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 88.

strategy as it attempted to move in a direction different than Zarqawi's confrontational strategy. AQI had already alienated a number of the tribal groups and Sunni nationalist/insurgent groups when it made efforts to take over smuggling routes and other illicit enterprises that these groups had long controlled.

These efforts of reconciliation made by Abu Hamzah would be challenging yet would significantly play in the organization's favor.<sup>104</sup> Reducing the amount of enemies and targets for the newly established Islamic State of Iraq would allow the organization to maximize efforts against more productive targets, especially since the organization was not strong enough to support a full-scale war with all of the Sunnis in Iraq. This was likely not a genuine forgiveness but a rational attempt at looking beyond past conflicts and moving forward with decisions and partnerships that would stimulate the best results. ISI leadership saw it necessary to balance the level of violence with the amount of support required from local Sunni tribes and insurgent organizations in order to ensure their survival and growth. Once again, its leaders chose the opportunity that would best serve the objective of the organization rather than strictly adhering to the previously established Zarqawiist ideology. This type of decision is a reflection of a rational leader seeking to make the best decisions for the survival and progress of the organization.

Even after Abu Hamzah's attempt at forging new partnerships and establishing the Islamic State in Iraq, not all tribal leaders were willing to align themselves with this group and the opposition continued to grow. This eventually resulted in the Awakening council or Sahwa forces which consisted of a number of tribes and Sunni insurgents who partnered with the U.S. and coalition forces to combat the growing threat of ISI. The effects of the Sahwa forces were felt dramatically by the newly established ISI, especially in collaboration with U.S. and coalition forces. With the indigenous knowledge of the territory combined with the resources and training from occupation forces, ISI lost significant territory and resources and was forced out of many major cities in Iraq. After feeling the backlash of the Sahwa forces, Abu Hamzah delivered instructions to his local emirs that significantly diverged from his previous 15 day strategy.

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<sup>104</sup> Fishman.

ISI's target selection was still broad yet calculated and appeared to be focused on removing any sort of enemy that would become an obstacle in reaching the caliphate. ISI conducted a greater number of attacks against the Iraqi government and security forces rather than the Awakening forces or coalition forces in Iraq from 2007–2010.<sup>105</sup> Based on statistical research looking at the 2007–2010 timeframe, 77% of ISI attacks were targeting Iraqi government and security forces, while only 10% of attacks were targeted against the Awakening forces and 13% against coalition forces.<sup>106</sup> This could also be explained by ISI's access to broad-based attacks against government buildings and civilians rather than carrying out conventional attacks against militarized Sahwa or coalition forces. ISI could focus on the target that it had the most direct access to, and the one that would have the most long term impact. Even Zarqawi believed the U.S. would withdraw at some point and the support of the Awakening forces would diminish over time—they just had to wait out the storm.

ISI's target selection was made clear in its strategic planning document which calls for “nine bullets to the apostates and one bullet to the crusaders” in its military planning strategy.<sup>107</sup> The Iraqi government and security forces all supporters of the government were declared apostates based on Salafi-jihadist interpretations, while the Crusaders were viewed as the U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq. This strategy allowed the organization to continue its anti-Shia sentiment initiated by Zarqawi, since the government was predominantly Shia, while also weakening the largest threat that stands in its path. This document also describes Sun Tzu's philosophy of creating disorder and internal problems within your enemy and forcing them to continuously rebuild rather than grow stronger and allows opportunities for ISI to move in and control territory while the government is weakened.<sup>108</sup> Hitting a target of an enemy's interests/stakes/claims forces increased

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<sup>105</sup> Katherine R. Seifert and Clark McCauley, “Suicide Bombers in Iraq, 2003–2010: Disaggregating Targets Can Reveal Insurgent Motives and Priorities,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5, 803–820, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.778198>.

<sup>106</sup> Seifert and McCauley.

<sup>107</sup> Mohammed M. Hafez, personal communication, December 2009.

<sup>108</sup> Mohammed M. Hafez, personal communication, December 2009.



security on all the remaining interests/stakes/claims the adversary has—thereby draining more resources to combat the security threat.<sup>109</sup>

## 2. Attempts to Gain Support

In September 2007, approximately one year after Abu Hamzah’s call for violence, he distributed instructions to his emirs calling for greater patience, unity, and limitations in their levels of violence.<sup>110</sup> He explains, “Beware of exaggerating the punishment or regretting the pardon; avoid distasteful harshness because the Shari’ah punishes to correct not to avenge.”<sup>111</sup> Excessive violence as a means of punishment toward the government, execution of tribal leaders who disagreed with the organization’s ideology was seen throughout the Zarqawi era. Zarqawi’s narrow definition of a true Muslim and al-Maqdisi’s concept of *al-wal’a w’al bara*, which requires loyalty to what is good and the disavowal of what is not, encouraged a culture of ex-communication of anyone who does not subscribe to AQI’s implementation of Sharia. This foundational layer of thinking promoted a culture of excessive punishment toward anyone who did not meet the narrow definition of a true Muslim. Zarqawi’s ideology did not promote a cautious, open-minded strategy that is being expressed in Abu Hamzah’s instructions “Beware of blood. Beware of spilling innocent blood. Nothing can bring destruction or rob you of grace as much as spilling innocent blood. Beware of strengthening your position and your soldiers with forbidden blood. Such a behavior will eventually lead to vulnerability and powerlessness.”<sup>112</sup> This is also contrary to Zarqawi’s takfiri ideological approach which was more confrontational and declared anyone who was not a believer in his version of Sharia was deserving of death. This suggests that Abu Hamzah has recognized, to some degree, the implications of killing fellow Sunni Muslims after feeling the efforts of the Sahwa forces throughout 2006–2007 and is attempting to limit any further deterioration of the organization and focus on its

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<sup>109</sup> Naji, *Management of Savagery*, 2006.

<sup>110</sup> “Islamic State of Iraq’s War Minister Issues Advice to Commanders,” Al-Buraq Islamic Network, September 23, 2007, [www.al-buraq.org/vb](http://www.al-buraq.org/vb).

<sup>111</sup> Al-Buraq Islamic Network.

<sup>112</sup> Al-Buraq Islamic Network.

survival and growth by being more discriminate in its use of violence. This shift in strategy demonstrated a certain level of adaptability, recognition of past mistakes, and a willingness to change rather than continuing to enforce an ideology that may be detrimental to the growth and functionality of the organization.

Abu Hamzah also states, “Do not permit your brothers to kill or capture those who might cause a division in their ranks and might disagree among them, even if this was permitted in other ways. Unity during fighting is a more important than unmatched interest.”<sup>113</sup> This is also highlighted in a 2009 document “*A Strategic Plan to Strengthen the Political Posture of the Islamic State of Iraq*,” which discusses the significance of forging a unity of effort.<sup>114</sup> While Zarqawi recognized the necessity of unity among ranks, the compromises expressed in these documents are less of the absolutist strategy Zarqawi called for, and more focused on modifying the organization’s doctrine and adapting principles and strategies that will lead to further expansion and establishment of a caliphate.

Abu Hamzah’s call for patience and greater caution in the use of force appeared to come from the perspective of a leader who has recognized mistakes made that contributed to the backlash that they were facing at the time. Furthermore, uncovered documents *Analysis of the ISI* demonstrated the organization’s recognition and analysis of the mistakes of 2006–2007 and sought to amend the organization’s doctrine in order to avoid total destruction and continue to grow.<sup>115</sup> By modifying this key aspect of the Zarqawi doctrine, Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar demonstrated that they recognized the repercussions of such an ideology and the limitations of their own capability to carry that out effectively. He called for unity in the fight rather than divisions which makes sense if you want any organization to be successful, you want to limit internal conflict and/or refrain from creating more conflict. Statistical research conducted by Mohammed Hafez demonstrates a significant uptick in violence from 2006–2007 followed by a sharp decrease after

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<sup>113</sup> Al-Buraq Islamic Network.

<sup>114</sup> Mohammed M. Hafez, personal communication, December 2009.

<sup>115</sup> *Analysis of the State of ISI*, Harmony Document NMEC-2007-612449, United States Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center (West Point, NY: Harmony Program, 2007) <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/analysis-of-the-state-of-isi-original-language-2/>.

September 2007—the timeframe in which these instructions were distributed. The study conducted does not analyze this document in relation to the changes in violence, but it is worth noting as a possible variable for the change, in addition to many others. The instructions provided by Abu Hamzah were influenced by his legal-rational style of authority combined with an opportunity that presented itself for the organization to avoid further backlash and even potentially grow.

The period of time after Abu Hamzah’s instructions continued the efforts of consolidating the base of the organization by aligning other tribesmen and militants with its organization. ISI was reluctant to join its cause with other groups but was more interested in absorbing other groups and individuals into its fold. In order to do this, ISI targeted specific leaders in order to remove individuals that were preventing the organization from getting to where it needed to be, rather than declaring an entire tribe or Sunni insurgent group as apostates and murdering mass groups of people. Instead, this organization took a more discriminate approach in its targeting, not necessarily to make allies through a softer approach, but likely as an effort to reduce the amount of effort it needed to expend. That is, if a group was preventing ISI from expanding into a particular territory, killing off the entire group would require more effort than it would take to remove one influential individual, and even offering something in return as a benefit to the impeding group. This method of engaging with the local tribes and Sunni insurgent groups became more embedded within the culture of ISI and fits the mold of a rational strategic approach. This organization made decisions based on an internal logic and rationale in order to meet the end-state of the organization.

### **3. Apocalypticism**

The organization’s religious doctrine remained to be the foundation of their objective, however the religiously inspired apocalyptic ideology appeared to be more instrumental in appealing to the masses rather than acting as an essential part of the organization’s strategy. There was very little among the correspondence from top-level leaders that demonstrated their zest or true belief of the End of Days. For instance, within the letters of instructions and advice from Abu Hamzah to the local emirs, the strategic plan for strengthening ISI

document, the analysis of ISI documents, and several press releases made by these leaders, there was little to indicate that ISI leaders placed apocalyptic ideology into the forefront of their decision-making, strategy, or instructions. Phrases were mentioned occasionally in public and especially used in recruitment messaging but were rarely emphasized in private correspondence. It appears that apocalypticism was effective in ISI's recruitment and propaganda efforts but remained on the backburner of the organization's strategy and was not a significant driver of decision-making in this period. Furthermore, ISI was likely willing to modify its apocalyptic doctrine in order to reach its ultimate objective, demonstrating that apocalypticism did not have a significant influence in the organization's ultimate behavior and decision-making.<sup>116</sup>

## **E. CONCLUSION**

ISI was an organization that was heavily influenced by the personality and leadership style and thinking of its individual leaders. The transition of leadership from a charismatic leader such as Zarqawi to the legal-rational thinkers of Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar presented a noticeable change that was reflected in the implementation of the organization's strategy. ISI's leaders were able to make decisions and implement strategy that demonstrated its rational thinking as well as its adaptive ability based on the developments of the situation at the time. ISI was able to make operational adjustments based on the developing operating environment—similar to U.S. military strategy execution, and similar adaptive capabilities of many large businesses that seek to modify and adapt to the changes in society and the market.

This organization focused its targeted efforts on weakening the Iraqi government while slowly moderating its attacks against other Sunnis, it allowed many groups that were disgruntled by the government an opportunity to join forces with ISI. This was especially productive after the Sahwa forces were turned over to the Iraqi government and were no longer receiving the support needed to sustain operations—ISI was able to fill that void. Additionally, adopting principles from well-established strategists along with recognizing

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<sup>116</sup> McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*.

the implications of past mistakes shaped the organization's thinking and forced its leaders to moderate its decision-making toward targets that would prove more productive for the organization as a whole. The rational strategic thinking that took place within the organization was driven by the individual leadership. The individual leadership of Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar were the key drivers in decision-making and behavior of ISI during this time period.

Like any type of large organization seeking long term success, ISIS has followed a rational strategic approach. Its willingness to adapt and modify its doctrine and strategy in order to meet its objective makes this group comparable to military organizations that continuously modify their strategy or doctrine based on the evaluation of lessons learned and making adjustments for what the time and situation calls for. Although its foundation and objective were religiously inspired, there are many indicators that demonstrate this group's legal-rational thinking that more heavily influenced its decision-making rather than a solely ideologically or religiously driven organization. This willingness to make adjustments in the group's grand strategy demonstrates the organization's willingness to modify their doctrine in order to achieve the ultimate objective and was a key driver in how the organization makes decisions.

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## **IV. THE CALIPHATE ERA (2013-PRESENT)**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will focus on the time period after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over as emir of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), later to become the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and his efforts toward establishing the caliphate. Throughout this period, it was apparent that the increase in brutality was more of a priority than leveraging support from the population and local tribes. The organization had already consolidated its base in Iraq and brought several other Sunni insurgent groups and tribesmen into their fold, which decreased the amount of opposition and limited the need for leveraging support from these local groups. The instrumental use of violence took priority over the need to gain local support, and was embedded in the organization's strategy. After analyzing all three themes, the apocalyptic ideology of the group played a greater role in co-opting foreign fighters and recruits to the organization throughout this era. As the organization continued to grow it also grew the apocalyptic narrative that defined the necessity of a caliphate and gave a certain level of fulfillment to the cause. While apocalypticism was influential in the behavior and decision-making at the individual level – to include foreign fighters and local recruits joining ISIS – it does not appear that apocalyptic ideology was a key driver in the organization's strategic decision-making and behavior. Furthermore, the organization's rational strategic approach in carrying out its strategy with an absolute idea of the organization's endstate. The ability to adapt and make changes to its doctrine and strategy while also remaining true to the organization's objective is a reflection of the organization's rational style thinking.

After another leadership transition took place in 2010 the organization saw a gradual change in the implementation of its organizational strategy. It continued the rational strategic approach that began with Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar but then gradually adopted a more absolutist strategy, similar to that favored by Zarqawi. This absolute way of thinking originated with Zarqawi's narrow definition of a "true Muslim" and a broad declaration of apostates. By 2014 the organization dialed up the level of brutality against a broad range of enemies, similar to its initial brutality in 2004, but this time they had more

resources and wisdom learned from past mistakes to aid them. After a period of growth and expansion the organization gained enough resources and leveraged enough strength to the point where they did not need to make concessions in order to survive. There was less of a need for adaptation in order to leverage support—as seen in the previous era—therefore, gaining local support from the population was not a large priority for the organization. Brutal displays of violence as means to coerce and intimidate were more common during this era than under Abu Umar and Abu Hamzah’s leadership.

Another prominent theme during this era is the impact of individual leadership throughout the organization, especially the clashes that take place among top level leaders of ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Jabat al-Nusra (JaN). Several clashes of personalities took place with disagreements on the appropriate way to continue to build networks relationships with fellow Sunni militants while also preserving the organization’s absolutist ideology.<sup>117</sup> The differences between the individual leaders Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, and Ayman al-Zawahiri were a prominent factor in the decisions made for each organization and the direction each group decided to go in. Each individual leader had his own vision of how ISIS should operate and collaborate with other Sunni militant groups. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was less amenable to modifying his brutally violent strategy and he was unwilling to take any advice from Ayman al-Zawahiri—emir of al-Qaeda Central since bin Laden’s death—or Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani—founder of Jabat al-Nusra.<sup>118</sup> Abu Bakr’s individual personality not only affected his ability to collaborate with other organizations and their leaders but it was also a factor in the execution of the organization’s strategy.

According to documents written by jihadists analyzing the organization’s strategy, it was clear that the authors had recognized mistakes made in the past and provided recommendations based on proclaimed military strategists. An influential jihadi strategist, and former al-Qaeda member, Abu Musab al-Suri argued in *Lessons Learned from the*

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<sup>117</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “And Wait, for We Are Also Waiting,” Al-Furqan Media Establishment, December 26, 2015, <http://www.muslim.org/vb/showthread.php?552816>.

<sup>118</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husayni and Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani,” Al Fajr Media Center, May 23, 2013, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com>.



*Jihad Ordeal in Syria*, that “the mujahidin in the 1980s did not have a comprehensive strategy and were ‘spread among numerous organizations,’ leading to ‘friction, hatred, and partisan bickering.’”<sup>119</sup> Al-Suri highlighted the need for one common strategy and the need for a unity of effort in this statement which was later articulated in other strategic jihadi documents.<sup>120</sup> Another document written by an ISI member was an example of rational analysis of ISI’s campaign that highlighted specific cases in which mistakes made within the organization as well as its impact to the organization’s strategy. The document also laid out steps to improve the organization’s military operations going forward.<sup>121</sup> Another captured jihadist document produced in 2009 provided an overall strategic plan for the organization to follow in order to establish the caliphate by forging a unity of effort, having more precisely measured military planning, creating an alternative to the Awakening Council, establishing the importance of political symbols, and treading carefully with the opposition in order to avoid repeating mistakes.<sup>122</sup> These documents were in addition to the seven stage master plan drafted by Zarqawi and Sayf al-Adl which provided a roadmap for establishing the caliphate, however there has been no direct link made between the two manifestos.<sup>123</sup> These writers appeared to have adopted the strategies of proclaimed military strategists such as Sun Tzu, Mao, and Clausewitz as many pieces of their doctrine reflect their teachings. Furthermore, the *Management of Savagery* manifesto written under the pseudonym Abu Bakr Naji and circulated since 2004 provided explanation and justification for the implementation of excessive violence which will ultimately lead to the desired Islamic caliphate.<sup>124</sup> There is no specific indication that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had read this manifesto or any others. These documents were never explicitly referred to in any of the uncovered correspondence between ISIS leaders utilized

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<sup>119</sup> *The Airport 1990*, Harmony Document AFGP-2002-600090, United States Military Academy Combatting Terrorism Center (West Point, NY: Harmony Program, 2007) <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/the-airport-1990-original-language-2/>.

<sup>120</sup> *The Airport 1990*.

<sup>121</sup> *Analysis of the State of ISI*.

<sup>122</sup> Mohammed M. Hafez, personal communication, December 2009.

<sup>123</sup> Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan*.

<sup>124</sup> Naji, *Management of Savagery*, 2006.

in this research, however, based on the similarity between priorities of ISIS leadership, the contents of these documents, and the actions of the organization which parallel the teachings of these documents, it is likely that these were at least somewhat influential in shaping the leadership's decisions.

ISIS was driven by the strategies outlined by educated leaders and implemented the use of brutal violence in their strategy as not only a means to an end, but as part of the end-state. By learning from these past leaders, ISIS was able to recognize when a moderation in violence was necessary (as reflected upon in the previous chapter) as opposed to the need for "performance violence" to create a theater of terror to instill fear and establish a level of dominance for the organization.<sup>125</sup> This type of messaging through the use of brutal violence was seen during Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's reign after the organization had gained enough strength and resources throughout the re-building phase which allowed them enough strength to withstand any local opposition that they might encounter.

## **B. POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONTEXT**

The chaos and disorder that took root in Syria after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings allowed ISI to expand and eventually declare itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The civil war within Syria created the perfect opportunity for the growing terrorist organization to take a stronghold in the predominantly Sunni country. In 2011, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani was sent to Syria by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to grow a jihadi network in Syria in order to eventually expand and declare the caliphate.<sup>126</sup> Jawlani established Jabat al-Nusra and it continued to gain strength in Syria, however, in 2013 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi planned to unite the two groups and declare the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, Jawlani refused. This created further divergence within the large jihadi network, yet ISIS continued to grow as its own organization.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. 3rd ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>126</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*.

<sup>127</sup> Fishman.

In 2014 the Iraqi army was weaker than many believed in terms of force numbers, weapons, discipline, and even politics. These armed forces were unable to contain the threat of a rapidly growing terrorist organization such as ISIS.<sup>128</sup> At this time there were no U.S. or coalition forces to take back the city of Fallujah as they had done in 2004, with weapons systems in need of repair and limited ammunition to support a long-term campaign.<sup>129</sup> Adding to the instability of were the political challenges within the Iraqi army. Political appointments to the senior officer corps led to a level of distrust between enlisted soldiers and commanders. There were stronger elements of the Iraqi army were but were believed to be “sectarian hit squads” as they were predominantly Shia.<sup>130</sup> These challenges did not place the Iraqi army as an effective security force to control, contain, or even limit the forces of ISIS from taking over major Iraqi cities.

Eventually dormant Sunni insurgent groups, such as the Islamic Army of Iraq, Ansar al-Sunnah, and the Mujahidin Army, which had previously fought against ISIS re-emerged and joined forces with the organization as a result of their frustration with the government.<sup>131</sup> Some could argue that the sectarian polarization that Zarqawi sought was finally taking root, resulting in more Sunni jihadists co-opted to fight against the Iraqi government. After enough attacks by the predominantly Shia government, local Sunnis were taking up arms against the government on a sectarian premise.<sup>132</sup> This sectarian divide allowed leaders of armed opposition groups to take advantage of the weakened country’s “fragile body politic.”<sup>133</sup> Baghdadi proclaimed ISIS as the “sole defender” of the Sunni community to combat against the exclusion and persecution of the Shia-dominant regime in Baghdad and the Alawite-led regime in Damascus.<sup>134</sup> ISIS declared the Islamic

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<sup>128</sup> Anthony Cordesman and Sam Khazai, “Iraq in Crisis,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 2014, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iraq-crisis-0>.

<sup>129</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 182.

<sup>130</sup> Fishman.

<sup>131</sup> Fishman, 183.

<sup>132</sup> Fishman, 186.

<sup>133</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017, 13.

<sup>134</sup> Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 13.

State and the establishment of the caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph – and there was no one large enough to stop this organization. All of this was in keeping with al-Adl’s master plan. The weakened Iraqi government and armed forces limited the amount of opposition ISIS would face and allowed the group to continue to grow.

### C. KEY LEADERS IN DECISION-MAKING

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was declared the emir of ISI in May 2010, three weeks after the deaths of Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi.<sup>135</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was from the predominantly Shia city of Samarra. His father was a prominent figure in the Albu Badri tribe and an imam at the local mosque.<sup>136</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi joined the Muslim Brotherhood while in graduate school and was later imprisoned in 2004 at Camp Bucca. During his time at Camp Bucca he was able to build relationships and networks that would continue to grow even after his imprisonment as this prison became somewhat of a terrorist education center.<sup>137</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi impressed other jihadi prisoners with his knowledge and education of Islam, given his PhD in Islamic studies, and even began moderating and settling disputes – ultimately earning respect of a lot of prisoners.<sup>138</sup> There is limited literature available on Abu Bakr that analyzes the impact of his previous education coupled with his experiences in prison—particularly in comparison to that of Zarqawi. It would be of interest to see if Abu Bakr’s time in prison had any impact on hardening his personality, similar to the brutal personal transformation that Zarqawi had undergone. After Abu Bakr’s release, he became emir of a small, sectarian group and eventually became Zarqawi’s ally around January 2006.<sup>139</sup> Abu Bakr has been referred to

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<sup>135</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 153.

<sup>136</sup> Fishman.

<sup>137</sup> Martin Chulov, “ISIS: The Inside Story,” *The Guardian*, December 11, 2014.

<sup>138</sup> Martin Chulov.

<sup>139</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 151.

as a Zaraqawiist as he also aimed to “purge the world of the ‘apostates’”<sup>140</sup> and believed “power and authority flowed from engagement on the battlefield.”<sup>141</sup>

Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani was a Syrian who joined Zaraqawi’s movement before 2003, left Iraq after Zaraqawi’s death, then returned to Iraq after doing a stint in Lebanon. Similar to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Jawlani was also imprisoned at Camp Bucca where he supposedly taught classical Arabic to other prisoners in 2008.<sup>142</sup> Upon his release from prison, Jawlani served with ISI in Mosul alongside Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi until he was sent to Syria in 2011. He became the emir of the group Jabat al-Nusra (JaN) but refused to align with Abu Bakr in order to establish the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham. Based on the dialogue between Abu Bakr, Jawlani, and Zawahiri, it seemed as though their personalities, leadership philosophies, and their perception of their own authority within the jihadi network were all different. Jawlani swore allegiance to al-Qaeda Central and viewed authority as coming from Zawahiri while Abu Bakr attempted to assert his own control and did not view Zawahiri as his or ISI’s ultimate authority and did not seek anyone’s permission when declaring the group as ISIS. Jawlani acted more as a student of bin Laden by aiming to “win over other militants” and began building relationships and networks in Syria rather than seeking to purge the population of apostates.<sup>143</sup> Contrastingly, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s leadership seemed to be somewhat of a blend between the populist Zaraqawi ideology and some of the legal-rational style leadership of Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar.

#### **D. STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS**

##### **1. Application of Violence**

The organization’s strategic thinking is what drove its application of violence and subsequent target selection. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi continued Zaraqawi’s vision of establishing the caliphate through the strategic use of brutal violence in which his reign of

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<sup>140</sup> Fishman, 170.

<sup>141</sup> Fishman, 173.

<sup>142</sup> Fishman, 168.

<sup>143</sup> Fishman, 170.

terror exceeded that of Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar and may even exceed that of Zarqawi. In 2014, the organization's brutality and lethality against other jihadis, tribal groups, and individual leaders substantially increased and was demonstrated publically.<sup>144</sup> ISIS "enforced [its] grandiose vision of supposed religious and political authority over every Muslim on earth.....by brutally killing anyone in its way..."<sup>145</sup>

A demonstration of their application of violence and target selection was stated in the organization's series "Clanging of the Swords" ISI stated in 2012 they would "hunt down and kill members of the Iraqi security forces and Sunni collaborators, but members of the police and Awakening who 'repent would be welcomed back into the Islamic State.'"<sup>146</sup> This was a more aggressive message than Abu Hamzah's message in 2006 when he first mentioned granting amnesty to those tribesmen who once fought against AQI, however, this message states the organization's willingness to actively seek out and eliminate their enemies while also seeking to leverage these groups as potential recruits. For instance in 2014 ISIS massacred hundreds of members of one of the tribes that had previously opposed the organization during the Awakening in 2007.<sup>147</sup> The targeting of this group was likely a means of long awaiting retaliation from the impact it felt during the Awakening as well as an opportunity for strategic messaging. This act of revenge likely lined up with the precise opportunity to remove a previous threat, avoid a future enemy to engage, and broadcast this massacre publically as a way of demonstrating its lethality. In September 2013, ISIS fighters killed JaN's local emir, Sa'ad al-Hadrami, in Raqqa who had previously supported Abu Bakr, even after JaN's split with ISIS, yet when al-Hadrami backed Zawahiri's declaration of JaN as al-Qaeda in Syria he became an enemy.<sup>148</sup> This change of allegiance by al-Hadrami was likely viewed as a betrayal to ISIS, making his

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<sup>144</sup> Fishman, xi.

<sup>145</sup> Fishman.

<sup>146</sup> "Clanging of the Swords—Part 1," Al-Furqan Media Establishment, June 30, 2012, <https://jihadology.net/?s=%E2%80%9CClanging+of+the+Swords%22>.

<sup>147</sup> Martin Chulov, "ISIS Kills Hundreds of Iraqi Sunnis from Albu Nimr Tribe in Iraq," *The Guardian*, October 30, 2014.

<sup>148</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*.

murder a vengeful assassination and another means of messaging to demonstrate the organization's power and willingness to kill anyone who does not align with them.

Additionally, the group's public beheadings of individuals such as the American journalist Steven Sotloff, among many others, is another example of the group's performance violence. Creating a theater of terror with broadcasted beheadings, death by burning alive, mass assassinations of groups of people, and public displays of gruesome punishment are all part of a strategic plan. According to Martha Crenshaw, acts of violence/terrorism are usually the result of an internal logic within the organization.<sup>149</sup> Rational thinkers make decisions based on means-ends thinking while also taking into consideration a limited number of options and also understanding the impact of their decisions.<sup>150</sup> Strategic thinking and rational decision making may not always be understood when combined with a terrorist group's desire to demonstrate power through dramatic acts of violence, however, ISIS has demonstrated a certain level of calculation in order to ensure its means reach the ultimate end-state.<sup>151</sup> The organization's strategic thinking is what drives this type of behavior as it seeks to establish itself as an Islamic state and carry out its version of Sharia law.

The Zarqawiist ideology which emphasizes that "power and authority flowed from engagement on the battlefield," as Fishman describes, was becoming more prominent during Abu Bakr's reign as emir.<sup>152</sup> Zarqawiism is described as a "dystopian cultural movement wrapped around a core set of ideological principles," according to Fishman.<sup>153</sup> Throughout this era there are many instances of vengeful and malicious attacks with greater lethality and more indiscriminate targets. There were many instances of calculated targets—even the drastic increase in lethality of attacks and overall brutality appeared to be intentional and calculated. As the group continued to gain strength in resources and forces,

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<sup>149</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 125.

<sup>150</sup> Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma*, 20.

<sup>151</sup> Shapiro.

<sup>152</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 178.

<sup>153</sup> Fishman, x.

it turned up the dial on lethality of attacks. Almost as a means of meeting the defining characteristics of a state, ISIS attempted to gain a monopolization of the use of force.<sup>154</sup> Once the organization had built up enough layers of leadership, administration and bureaucracy in order to maintain itself as a somewhat functional organization it was better positioned to implement the brutal use of violence since they were confident that there were very few, if any, who could oppose them.<sup>155</sup> This era drove a more vengeful, terror-focused strategy of savagery that would demonstrate the organization's credibility and dominance and instill enough fear in order to reduce potential adversaries. This again supports the argument of this organization acting as rational strategists. They sought to minimize their enemies, reduce the number of groups and individuals fighting against them, continued to consolidate their base and expand while establishing themselves as a growing, credible threat through the use of excessive violence and brutality. This increased level of lethality allowed ISIS to coerce and intimidate groups into joining with them in order to consolidate their base, continue to gain strength and resources, and further expand its territory.

## **2. Attempts to Gain Support**

With ISIS having a wide net of targets and the organization's more indiscriminate target selection, there seemed to be less of the principal-agent problem that was seen in the previous era in which junior officers were found using excessive violence that were not in keeping with the organization's strategy at the time. Even though this organization still faced other common organizational dilemmas, such as communication and security tradeoffs, its use of violence did not create as many internal issues as seen in the previous era—or at least limited documentation is available to reflect this. Furthermore, since the organization was more interested in creating fear among the population rather than winning over its support there were fewer limitations from top-level leadership that would make a strict distinction between a justified or unjustified killing since this standard was so low for a justified killing. During this era, ISIS prioritized the imposition of *hudud* legal

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<sup>154</sup> Epley, "Weber's Theory of Charismatic Leadership."

<sup>155</sup> Fishman, *The Master Plan*.



punishments<sup>156</sup> over providing services or trying to win over the hearts and minds of the population. While implementing the hudud punishments ISIS used a public display of disturbing bloody punishments that acted as a deterrent for further violation of Islamic law. ISIS justified its use of force and punishment through Quranic scriptures, and based on their level of control with the use of force there was no state security or local security to protect the population from this implementation of terror. According to the uncovered administrative documents by Ayman al-Tammimi, ISIS began its attempt at governance by establishing ordinances based on Islamic law. ISIS created a threat, then offers protection against it, similar to any state's attempt at monopolizing the use of force.<sup>157</sup>

ISIS had not prioritized winning over the support of the population but was more focused on establishing its authority and exerting its control over territory. ISIS began to implement its form of governance and created administrative documents designed to outline and enforce their version of Sharia law, while the population struggled to meet the needs of daily life. Farmers struggled to grow and gather wheat from land ISIS had overtaken. Access to resources such as electricity and clean water were limited. ISIS realized that support from the population was important for success and eventually focused on providing the population with the necessary resources but was more concerned with creating a just and obedient society. There do not appear to be any indicators of the organization changing its strategy as a whole in order to meet the needs of the population. It is likely that gaining support from the local population was not the key driver in the organization's behavior and decision making.

### **3. Apocalypticism**

The role of apocalyptic ideology in the organization's behavior and decision-making throughout this period is somewhat ambiguous and contradicting in itself. At the individual level, apocalyptic fervor appeared to be a key driver in recruitment and foreign fighters seeking to join the organization. At the organizational level, however,

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<sup>156</sup> Punishments according to Islamic law that are mandated and fixed by God.

<sup>157</sup> Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 223.

apocalypticism did not appear to be at the forefront of strategic decision-making and ultimate behavior. Similar to the previous eras, apocalypticism was predominant in the group's propaganda and messaging but was contradicted in its collaboration with groups that were less indoctrinated with the religion. As mentioned in previous chapters, having in-depth knowledge of Quranic scriptures was not a requirement to be as ISIS fighter. There is little insight as to whether or not Abu Bakr actually believed in the apocalyptic ideology, however, the use of an Islamic narrative that would justify an urgent need to establish the caliphate seems to be an effective instrument in appealing to the masses. It appears as though, the apocalyptic narrative was used in order to justify the organization's cause and ultimate reason for existence.

The most significant demonstration of apocalypticism was when ISIS fighters captured the town of Dabiq, Syria because of its significance in the End of Times prophecies. Taking the town of Dabiq was not militarily significant, which would not appear to be a smart decision strategically. The town's prophetic significance, however, did lend legitimacy to the organization's cause and furthered the use of the Islamic apocalyptic narrative. It is uncertain if this was a true apocalyptic belief embedded in the minds of the terrorist group fighters and leadership, or if this was an attempt at a symbolic target that the organization failed to retain. Zarqawi and Abu Umar mentioned the prophecy of Dabiq in public statements made but it is unclear if these are genuine beliefs or a means to rally support and inspire motivation. There was no indication that any sort of order or direction from top level leadership outlined the significance of Dabiq as part of the apocalypse or even its significance to the organization's end-state. Furthermore, the fighters' drastic retreat from the city rather than fighting to the death in an effort to defend the city and defeat the Free Syrian Army that came in to re-capture the city is one indication that this group does not hold a strong apocalyptic ideology as a key driver of their decision making. Additionally, the group made the rational decision to withdraw after facing an enemy they were unable to defeat, which superseded any sort of religious apocalyptic fervor. The End of Times rhetoric promulgated by ISIS appeared to be instrumental in its propaganda and recruitment and was primarily a messaging tool for the organization to attract recruits, continue to implement its strategic use of violence in order to gain more

territory, enforce its version of governance, and meet its objective of establishing the caliphate.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

ISIS' behavior and decision-making during this era was largely driven by the organization's top level leadership, rational-strategic approach to thinking, the use of strategic jihadist documents, and especially the instrumental use of violence embedded within the organization's strategy. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was markedly different than Zarqawi but eventually demonstrated many similarities in the broad target selections and the increased level of lethality used against targets. The chaos and disorder in the region at the time allowed for organizations like ISIS and JaN to take a foothold in areas in which the government security forces were weak and were not match for these large, brutal organizations. Taking advantage of such an opportunity and following the guidance set forth by several jihadist strategists appears to be more of a calculated move rather than a spontaneous, religiously-inspired motivation. This organization had an objective, learned from past mistakes in previous eras, continued to weaken governments and organizations that would try to oppose them, continued to gain strength and resources until it became stronger than any opposition in its path. These were all achieved by taking a rational-strategic approach led by a legal-rational style leader.

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## **V. COMPARISON AND CONCLUSION**

This thesis asked: what factors motivate the behavior and decision-making of ISIS; what consistencies or inconsistencies lie in the organization's doctrine, strategy, and ideology; and, under what conditions is ISIS willing to modify its religious or political doctrine in order to achieve its ultimate objective? Three hypotheses were tested in order to answer these questions 1) Violence is a vital component to the organization's strategy. It has played a significant role and remained a consistent factor its behavior and decision-making; 2) Support from the local population and local tribes will be vital for ISIS to achieve its objective. Any amendments made to the group's doctrine or compromises made in the interest of gaining support will demonstrate its significance in influencing ISIS' behavior and decision-making; 3) Apocalyptic ideology is a core part of the organization's leadership's belief system among the organization's leaders, and will remain a consistent justification used for achieving the objective of a united caliphate.

This chapter explains and summarizes the research of this thesis, compares and contrasts the evolutionary eras of ISIS' existence, analyzes the three hypotheses being tested, and presents overall findings. This thesis argues that ISIS is willing to modify its doctrine in order to achieve its ultimate objective based on the organization's inconsistencies found within each hypothesis tested and its willingness to modify its use of violence as well as its relations with other Sunni groups. Apocalyptic ideology, however, remained a consistent theme throughout the group's evolution as a consistent aspect of messaging and propaganda but was not a key driver of behavior and strategic decision-making.

### **A. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH**

Chapter I presented the research question of this thesis and examined a variety of existing literature on terrorism, terrorist organization, the evolution of ISIS as an organization, ways to define ISIS, and Islamic apocalypticism. Chapter II explored the era from 2000–2006 which demonstrated the significance of Zarqawi's influence on the evolution of AQI, later to become ISIS. Zarqawi's grand strategy, which was likely influenced heavily by his extreme personality, emphasized excessive brutality, and

maximizing opportunities created by the political security environment of Iraq at the time. Similarly, Chapter III explores the era from 2007–2013 which is heavily influenced by Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar and demonstrates a shift in the organization’s priorities and overall strategy. The level of extreme brutality was curbed by the necessity of building relations with local Sunni tribes and insurgent groups in order to ensure survival and limit opposition. This shift in behavior in balancing the level of violence with the integration of other local groups demonstrates the group’s willingness to compromise and adapt to certain degrees. Chapter IV explores the final era of ISIS which takes place from 2014-present. This era is heavily influenced by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who takes over in 2010 and continues to grow and expand the organization while also increasing the level of brutality.

## **B. RE-EXAMINATION OF THE HYPOTHESES**

Among the three themes researched there appears to be a delicate balance between the utilization of excessive violence as part of the organizational strategy, local support, and the ideological belief of apocalypticism. The way in which the organization balanced the use of violence with gaining enough support from other local Sunni tribes and insurgent groups was likely an effort made to grow strength in numbers but also to limit the amount of opposition they faced. Balancing violence, support, and ideology changed throughout various leadership transitions and throughout the group’s evolution, which demonstrates the adaptability of the organization. That is, rather than remaining consistent in its use of excessive violence, and brutality ISIS is willing to make amendments to its doctrine after facing significant opposition and recognizing a variety of lessons learned. Additionally, the organization managed the apocalyptic ideology as part of its overall messaging and justification for the objective, but there were still limits to how much this ideological belief was actually inherent in decision-making.

## **C. FINDINGS**

In comparing the different eras since Zarqawi, there appear to be other factors that were more significant drivers of decision-making that help explain certain inconsistencies in the organization’s behavior. Three other factors remained prevalent throughout and somewhat explain the variation in violence, leveraging support, and apocalypticism. These

three factors include 1) the ideologically-driven objective of establishing the caliphate, 2) the rational approach to implementing and executing the organizational strategy, and 3) the leadership transitions that took place as well as the characteristics of the different leaders. The organization's objective appears to have deep roots within the ideology in which its leaders were unwilling to make any sort of compromise on the end state. The strategy implementation did appear to be more of a rational strategic approach based on the rational actor model.<sup>158</sup> Finally, the change in leadership—i.e., from Zarqawi to Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—that took place within the organization impacted the decision-making and behavior of the group, not only due to the different personality characteristics of each individual leader, but also the transitions itself were significant inflection points in the organization's evolution.

### **1. The Ideological Objective**

The objective of establishing the caliphate remained consistent throughout the organization over time. The leaders of ISIS had a clearly defined idea of what the organization was seeking to achieve and were unwilling to make compromises on what the caliphate would look like. There were various disagreements on the implementation of sharia law within the caliphate, but the overall strategic end-state remained consistent. As stated in previous chapters, the leaders of ISIS and al-Qaeda Central did not view any Muslim-majority state as a legitimate government. Even Saudi Arabia which operated under strict sharia law did not meet their clear definition of what the caliphate should look like. Some of the desire to establish an Islamic state was fueled by hatred and vengeance against other governments but many Salafi-jihadists truly believed that no current form of governance as legitimate if it does not follow God's prescribed law.<sup>159</sup> The belief that sovereignty belongs to God and that any state system that is governed by the people rewards condemnation and is rejected by many jihadis.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Andrew L. Stigler, *The Rational Actor Model: Applications for National Security and Governance*, (Newport, RI: Naval War College, December 2008).

<sup>159</sup> Al-Aymen al-Zawahiri, "Sharia and Democracy," in *The Al Qaeda Reader* (New York: 2007).

<sup>160</sup> Zawahiri, "Sharia and Democracy."

Furthermore, the group was unwilling to modify its objective in order to accept anything less than a united caliphate. There was no moderate interpretation or view of this objective or what it would look like in terms of power and control. This became a greater issue when Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani began to develop a stronghold in Syria and began making compromises with other militant leaders rather than bringing them into the Islamic State fold.<sup>161</sup> Jawlani's relations with militant leaders differed from ISI's dealings with other Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq after the Awakening Councils, which only gave these organizations the option to join ranks with ISI rather than maintain their own group's identity.<sup>162</sup> A certain amount of absolutism and unwillingness to compromise elements of unification was necessary and significant in achieving the long-term objective of one united caliphate.

Based on the consistency of this objective and the organization's unwillingness to compromise its idea of the power the caliphate should have, it is likely that this objective was more than purely a self-interested goal for power, money, or control. Although it is possible that some key individual leaders may have been interested in power and control, it is unlikely to be the main motivator. That is, if this concept were purely individually driven, after facing the significant backlash from the Awakening Council, the constant opposition from other Sunni insurgent groups and local tribes, and the bombings from U.S. and coalition forces would likely have attrited the group's willingness to continue fighting; yet this organization bounced back and kept moving forward. Establishing the caliphate was not an objective that was easily given up on and forgotten and was likely a true belief in the minds of these leaders. Since the foundation of their objective was ideologically driven and held so much strength, the organization was interested in its own survival and dedicated to its objective. ISIS would go to great lengths to achieve this objective rather than admitting defeat and walking away.

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<sup>161</sup> Fishman, "Dysfunction and Decline."

<sup>162</sup> Fishman.



## 2. The Rational Actor

Although having an objective that is driven by an extreme or radical ideology is not typically associated with rational actors, the strategy designed to establish the caliphate appeared to be implemented through a rational approach. Although the rational decision-making varied based on the individual, the rational-strategic approach was commonly recognized under each key leader. The leaders of the organization recognized mistakes that other jihadist organizations had made in the past and incorporated lessons learned into an evolving strategy. For instance, Zarqawi emphasized the use of violence against the Shia population, rather than the U.S. and focused target selection against the Iraqi government and security forces as they were viewed as predominantly Shia.<sup>163</sup> Zarqawi recognized the limited timeline of U.S. occupation in Iraq and the long-term implications of the predominance of Shia in Iraq's political environment.<sup>164</sup> This specific targeting of Shia did not appear to be part of any deep-seeded hatred of Shia people but rather a long-term strategic outlook of the power struggle that would take place. Zarqawi believed if he weakened this opponent enough it would create the environment necessary to establish the caliphate.

Zarqawi and his fellow leaders also took advantage of the opportunities created at the time by utilizing apocalyptic messaging as an explanation for such chaos and disarray. This was an effective way to appeal to the masses by leveraging an Islamic narrative that Muslims are already familiar with and associating it with the unexplainable phenomenon going on at the time. The instrumental use of an ideological belief fits into the strategic-rational approach this organization consistently took. There were situations, however, in which Zarqawi and other leaders acted out of vengeance or retaliation, but that was not what the organization's overall strategy was based on. In fact, Zarqawi's coordinated attacks on the hotels in Jordan, which was likely an act of vengeance and arguably his biggest blunder as AQI leader, did not fit the rational strategic approach and was even condemned by fellow al-Qaeda Central leadership, and especially a number of Jordanian

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<sup>163</sup> Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, "Letter to Ayman al-Zawahiri," United States Department of State, February 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>.

<sup>164</sup> Zarqawi, "Letter to Ayman al-Zawahiri."

tribes and insurgent groups.<sup>165</sup> Overall, AQI focused its efforts on strategic target selection that would create an ideal environment for the establishment of the caliphate.

The transition of leadership to Abu Hamzah, Abu Umar, and later Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi shifted from Zarqawi's charismatic archetype to a more legal-rational approach in which the organization's strategy evolved and changed over time.<sup>166</sup> This group highlighted specific examples of errors made in their own use of violence and indiscriminate targeting and the impact to the organization's strategy and objectives, then made changes to its own strategy and implementation of violence. This ability to adapt to the situation and change course, rather than stubbornly staying committed to its original doctrine of excessive violence, demonstrates a realistic rational approach to their behavior. By making a conscious decision to limit the level of brutal violence in order to establish partnerships, grow the organization, and limit the amount of opposition demonstrates the organization's willingness to compromise aspects of its doctrine for its own survival. The organization recognized the implications of using excessive brutality and adjusted its strategy accordingly. This is not to say that ISI completely changed its doctrine or abandoned extreme brutality, but the organization attempted to be more precise and calculated in its target selection rather than using indiscriminate lethality.

Furthermore, ISI's approach to its relations with local tribes and other insurgent groups was also likely driven by the recognized advantage ISI would have by working with these groups rather than fighting them. The cost-benefit analysis that led to a shift in the organization's relations with these groups is a reflection of ISI's strategic rational approach.<sup>167</sup> As the effects of the Awakening Council eventually dwindled down, ISI took advantage of the previously U.S.-supported Sahwa forces that were left with little resources and little support from the Iraqi government. ISI strategically brought these groups and people into its fold and rather than hold bitterness, hatred, or even a desire for vengeance against these groups that had previously fought against them. ISI leaders saw a greater

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<sup>165</sup> Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*.

<sup>166</sup> Epley, "Weber's Theory of Charismatic Leadership."

<sup>167</sup> Stigler, "The Rational Actor Model."

benefit to partnering with these groups and leveraging their strength and support than continuing to fight against them, which is another demonstration of the rational actor model. Prioritizing the benefits of partnership rather than maintaining an adversarial relationship demonstrates that the group recognizes cost-benefit analysis to a certain degree, which fits the rational actor model.<sup>168</sup>

ISI also capitalized on the political grievances created by the Iraqi government as well as the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings in Syria. Both of these opportunities allowed ISI to expand and eventually declare itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). This group recognized opportunities to take advantage of, continued to gain strength, learned from their own mistakes and the mistakes of jihadists in the past, and then modified their doctrine to create a reliable strategy. ISIS gained enough strength that with the weaknesses of the Iraqi security forces and the Syrian civil war ongoing, that it was able to seize control and more widely implement its form of governance. Some may attribute much of the organization's success to luck of the political and security situation at the time, however, it is more apparent that these decisions were made with the long-term objective in mind and even with a dynamic operating environment this organization was able to follow the strategy outlined and adapt as necessary.

### **3. The Leadership Transition**

The influence of individual key leaders of ISIS and the transition between them allowed for a variation in personality characteristics, individual motivations, and leadership approaches that allowed the organization to continue to grow and progress rather than stagnate. The organization began with the charismatic leadership of Zarqawi who was innovative, passionate, strong, and authoritative. Zarqawi recognized a new strategic approach to establish the caliphate that was different than the approach that other AQ leaders and strategists had taken to achieve this objective and was more absolute in his approach. Zarqawi emphasized that the necessity of allegiance to Islam comes from the battlefield, which fed into his narrow definition of a true Muslim, and anyone who fell

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<sup>168</sup> Stigler, "The Rational Actor Model."

outside of that was declared an apostate and their death would be justified. Zarqawi created this extreme culture of purging the world of apostates, which he justified through Islamic texts and historical precedence. He shaped the thinking of his junior leaders but also created some dissent with senior AQ Central leadership because of his extreme strategic approach. Zarqawi's strong character, authoritative presence, and extreme personality allowed him to create a mass following of people who supported his extreme approach but also created a lot of enemies.

Abu Hamzah continued the call for the extreme violence that Zarqawi had emphasized but Abu Hamzah made greater efforts to maintain relations with AQ leadership and other Sunni militant groups in Iraq. Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar showed more patience, adaptability, and even humility in recognizing the implications of maintaining Zarqawi's extreme strategy of declaring much of the world apostates deserving death. This demonstrates the realist approach these leaders took, which contrasted from Zarqawi's leadership. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi also continued the legal-rational style leadership of his predecessors in order to grow and expand the organization's span of control. As ISIS became stronger Abu Bakr was less willing to compromise and was more determined to establish superiority which involved an increase in brutality and extreme measures. The variation in leadership was influential in how the organization operated throughout different periods of their evolution.

Although it is difficult to predict a counter-factual, but it is possible that if this leadership transition had not taken place, it may have taken the organization longer to recognize its own mistakes and make certain modifications to its strategy. Due to the change in leadership which added a new perspective with the organization's decision making power. After Zarqawi's death, Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar did not make drastic changes to the organization right away but also recognized certain areas that were in need of repair and gradually made distinct changes to the organizations. Similarly, when Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar were killed and were replaced by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi he, too, continued the efforts of his predecessors but also offered a new perspective in the organization's decision making. The target selection of the group gradually became more absolutist as the organization gained strength and expanded further. It is also difficult to

analyze whether or not Abu Hamzah and Abu Umar would have been able to continue the organization's progression in such a way as Abu Bakr. The transition of leadership allowed for a fresh perspective that could more easily recognize what was not working well within the organization and what types of changes to implement. Each leader kept the overall objective in mind and had the support of a collective groups of leaders known as the Shura Council to make decisions, but the variation of leadership in power created an opportunity for a fresh and perhaps more critical perspective to be incorporated into the decision-making process for the organization.

#### **D. FINAL THOUGHTS**

The balance between extreme violence and leveraging support, supported by a strong ideology was the determining factor in this organization's successes and failures, which feeds directly into how the organization made its decisions and acted accordingly. The group's use of extreme violence under Zarqawi's rule was a strong kick start for the organization but was significantly impacted when local tribes and Sunni insurgent groups became fed up with this group's attempt to exert control rather than make attempts to collaborate. The extreme measures of AQI eventually tipped the scale creating a significant opposition that the group was no prepared to defeat. After recognizing the group's own limitations, it attempted to re-balance and offered forgiveness, made compromises, and became more discriminate in its targeting. The organization gained enough strength and resources to the point where they faced little opposition, took control of more territory, and increased its brutal measures; Yet, again, the group crossed the threshold of an "acceptable level of violence" and suffered an even greater backlash from international community.

The underlying factors that drove the organization's behavior and ability to balance and adapt began with the group's stronghold on an objective that was ideologically driven. Establishing the caliphate was not to be compromised and its leaders truly subscribed to this belief that achieving this objective is necessary. The organization's rational approach, utilization of famous military and jihadist strategist teachings, recognition of mistakes made, and the ability to adapt to the circumstances drove the strategic thinking and decision making of ISIS. Finally, the leadership transitions that allowed for unique perspectives,

which may not have otherwise been recognized if one single leader been responsible the entire time, shaped the way changes took place within the organization. All of these things were significantly influential in the organization's behavior and decision-making process.

#### **E. IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research for this thesis suggests that the key decision makers of large terrorist organization are not necessarily fanatical or irrational actors. The key leaders of ISIS took a rational strategic approach to reach a desired end state by clearly defining their objective, developing a coherent strategy based on lessons learned from past jihadists, and modifying their doctrine based on the political security situation at the time. The implementation of this organization's strategy mirrored many aspects of U.S. military strategy implementation and followed examples of many great military strategists that are currently taught within the U.S. Department of Defense. Furthermore, the ideologically-driven objective and subsequent strategy that remained flexible and adaptable allowed an organization such as ISIS to grow significantly and achieve certain levels of success. This is something that is likely to be re-created given the strong desire of the objective. The fact that ISIS remained uncompromised in its objective but was willing to recognize its own mistakes and make appropriate changes and adaptations to its strategy demonstrates not only the strong desire to achieve the objective but also the significance of the objective itself. Organizations such as ISIS will likely continue to learn and grow over time by learning from past successes and failures in order to achieve such an ideologically-driven objective.



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