# I. Articles

## New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016)

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### Abstract

*The Islamic State, despite its longevity, prolific media enterprise, and high profile, escapes easy definition by policymakers, academics, and the media. An examination of the movement using Mao's revolutionary warfare framework, particularly his three stages of conflict, provides a more holistic view of the organization for both understanding and action. As part of an exploration, Islamic State captured documents and press releases were examined to establish the innovations and breadth of its adaptation of Maoist principles of guerilla warfare and the evolution of the theoretical influences on the doctrine from previous Salafi-militant experiences and publications. This research provides valuable insight into the return of a powerful method of insurgency as well as a glimpse into the vast pseudo-clandestine insurgency that is the Islamic State movement.*

**Key Words:** *Revolutionary Warfare; Terrorism; Iraq; Islamic State*

### Introduction

Two years after the fall of Iraq's second largest city to the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL, and Daesh), there is still an alarming dissensus concerning their nature, strategy, and goals. Is it a nihilistic terrorist group, an apocalyptic death cult, an insurgency, a terrorist army, a proto-state, or some hybrid of these? Does the group really adopt Islamic principles, or is it a Sunni neo-Ba'athist restoration movement with genocidal proclivities?[1] The confusion is not limited to academics, whose writings about the Islamic State are insightful yet rarely stray from singular research areas like ideology, economics, terrorism, religion, or regional studies. Even the US Special Forces commander tasked with countering the group in late 2014 admitted in a candid moment that he and his command did not understand "this movement."[2]

To add even more complexity, the group's evolution is rather opaque to the uninitiated, with multiple name changes that force even the bravest reporter to resort to euphemisms in their limited historical references. As such, the Islamic State is referred to in newspaper articles as a successor to Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), an offshoot of Al Qaeda, a splinter group from Al Qaeda, a group that rose out of the ashes of AQI, and even frequently as a sui generis group born in 2014. While there are grains of truth in each appellation, they are all partial representations that further obscure rather than clarify.

The resultant confusion is much like a musical ensemble trying to play without a common set of sheet music. If alive today, both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz would disapprove of our collective failure to understand this enemy and to fully grasp the kind of war the Islamic State is waging. This article aims to expand on the idea of the Islamic State as a revolutionary group that has adopted Mao's protracted warfare to establish an expansive caliphate by closely examining its adaption of the doctrine of revolutionary warfare and its execution at the operational level of war.[3] If we are to understand the Islamic State, how its members have operated in the past and intend to operate in the future, an examination of the evolution of the group using Mao's three phases of revolutionary warfare can be helpful.

The idea of a Salafi jihadist group like the Islamic State using political-military doctrine spawned and honed by Marxists might seem fantastical. Yet even a casual glance at movement pronouncements over more than

a decade reveals strategic thought that is clearly influenced by Mao's protracted war concept. In a recent statement that referred to the Islamic State's battlefield defeats, official spokesman Abu Mohammad al Adnani said:

> *Were you victorious when you killed Abu Mus'ab, Abu Hamzah, Abu 'Umar, or Usamah? Would you be victorious if you were to kill ash-Shishani, Abu Bakr, Abu Zayd, or Abu 'Amr? No. Indeed, victory is the defeat of one's opponent ... were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land? … And victory is that we live in the might of our religion or die upon it. It is the same, whether Allah blesses us with consolidation or we move into the bare, open desert, displaced and pursued.[4]*

This passage is almost incomprehensible in the abstract. Adnani is referencing past leaders of the movement since 2002 in a much different way than you will see in contemporary accounts, highlighting the continuity and the resilience of an organization that has seen its share of victories and defeats. A Syrian volunteer who joined the movement in 2002 and worked for many of those named in the statement–Abu Mus'ab (al Zarqawi), Abu Hamza (al Muhajir) and Omar (al Baghdadi)–Adnani is speaking here in the grammar of Mao's three phases of protracted warfare with references to the desert, pursuit, and consolidation.[5]

Accordingly, this examination of the Islamic State's adoption of Mao's revolutionary war framework is based on the perspective of movement veterans like Adnani, and many others whose writings and speeches were found in captured documents or press releases. This article will evaluate whether Mao's revolutionary war doctrine is a viable framework to view conflict in the 21st century, investigate the influence of revolutionary warfare on the Islamic State leadership, and finish with a detailed exposition of the Islamic State's adaptation and execution of revolutionary warfare doctrine, by phase, since 2002.

## *Whither Revolutionary Warfare? From Mao to the two Musabs*

Referring to the different elements residing in the larger Salafi jihadist movement, Ryan wrote that Al Qaeda's strategies of conflict with the West are highly influenced by the famous canons of revolutionary warfare literature based on his analysis of the writings of al Muqrin, al Suri, Naji, and al Qurashi.[6] Kalyvas proposed using a revolutionary framework to analyze the Islamic State in order to use recent history to explain and understand, while resisting the temptation to see it as something exceptional.[7] And Dubik, an influential practitioner-scholar, calls the war "our enemies are waging a global, revolutionary war."[8]

This view is not uncontested. One practitioner with experience in Afghanistan called the reliance on using a revolutionary war lens for insurgencies outdated and simplistic, due to the "balkanization" of groups into localized insurgencies with divergent aims and little care about national level governance competitions.[9] Another recent typology of insurgencies published by the U.S. Army War College categorizes Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in the "Radical Islamist" category – with little explanation as to what this type of insurgency is trying to accomplish. In contrast, the author listed Revolutionary/People's War as a defunct "legacy form." There is no consideration that a religiously infused ideology could function in the same manner that Marxism did in motivating a similar version of People's War.

To examine the Islamic State's adaptation of its own revolutionary war doctrine, a review of its original prescriptions is in order. The aforementioned Army War College publication has a reasonable definition of People's War: a form of irregular war that utilizes "peasant armies that are drawn upon for an integrated and protracted politico-military phase strategy of eventual state takeover. A shadow or proto-state is created in parallel to the pre-existing one being targeted for elimination."[10]

Mao, the first proponent and theorist of this type of warfare, believed that victory was only possible once the population is mobilized to support the guerillas, whose goal is to attack the enemy when advantaged and to shy away from conflict when not. The part time fighters and their supporters are to be indoctrinated in the

political philosophy of the movement to motivate them to fight and persevere through a protracted struggle. The campaign progresses through three phases of blended guerilla activities and increasing conventional strength: the *building/preservation phase,* the *expansion phase,* and the *decisive* phase. These periods are fluid and conditions vary from location to location, usually dependent on enemy strength and efforts. The keys to success are developing experienced and disciplined soldiers that bond well with a supportive population, the utilization of a strong influence campaign with propaganda units at the lowest levels, and an integrated set of political goals that are synchronized with military efforts at all levels.[11]

Revolutionary war is more than military action, since those who choose to utilize it blend "military, political, economic, social, and psychological" efforts to achieve their goals.[12] The military objectives are two fold; a slow defeat of the government's army as well as the use of terror to cripple the existing social organization, which before the conflict served to "restrict or minimize violence among the people." Once the violence reaches a certain level, these barriers collapse.[13] Crenshaw noted in her study of revolutionary warfare in Algeria that terrorism almost always acts as a "principal instrument" in this form of political violence.[14] This instrument is "not aimed, as war is, at the annihilation of the enemy's coercive forces, but seeks to wound him politically and psychologically."[15] Finally, the movement taxes the population under its influence in order to fund operations and derive legitimacy for the shadow state.[16]

While much has been written about the ideological influences of Taymiyah, Qutb, Banna, and Azzam on Islamic State leaders, little has been written on revolutionary warfare's influence on how these same commanders view strategy. In the larger Salafi jihadist school of thought, the evidence of its impact is unmistakable. Al Qaeda strategists propound a three-stage guerilla warfare strategy following the Maoist model, and frequently cite Mao, Giap, Che Guevara, Marighella, and Taber.[17] The most prolific of these influential writers was a Syrian known as Abu Musab al Suri, who published a 1600 page tome titled *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance.* Al Suri was a lecturer in military strategy in the jihadist circuit in the Afghan camps in the 1990s and influenced a young and independent Jordanian leader named Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the founder of the Islamic State movement.[18]

Suri's writings on the lessons learned from the Syria campaign, a brutally honest critique of the Islamist uprising against Hafez Assad (1976-1982), were found in jihadist camps in Afghanistan after the 2001 invasion. The following are a few of these lessons that are applicable to groups waging revolutionary war: maintain a covert organization even when seeing success; push a centralized strategy in a decentralized organization that is compartmentalized to avoid compromise; do not prioritize military activities over public opinion; safeguard all communications; quality over quantity in recruits; adopt a clear pattern of publicizing operations; stay true to the Muslim banner; and avoid factionalism by indoctrinating all members.[19]

These lessons served as guides for Abu Musab al Zarqawi's early followers in Iraq in 2002.[20] Begun with a handful of stalwart followers, Zarqawi transformed the movement into the dominant element of the post-2003 resistance to occupation, establishing de facto control over the Anbar province by 2006.[21] The establishment of the Islamic State in October 2006 corresponded with a split in the Sunni community which led to many defections to the government, with some resistance groups joining rebellious Sunni tribes in the newly formed Sahwa (Awakening groups).[22] Zarqawi's successor Abu Omar al Baghdadi and his deputy Abu Hamza al Muhajir found themselves facing challenges on all sides before adapting their organization to leverage the advantages of a clandestine movement and adapting tactics of subversion and revolutionary warfare to remove Sunni rivals and government supporters from historic core areas and regain a base of political support in the Sunni community.[23] Islamic State ability to control territory after 2010 facilitated the mobilization of supporters to its cause.[24] Once pro-government Sunnis were eliminated from key areas, Iraqi security forces stood little chance of defeating an underground subversive movement, and their COIN practices suffered in direct correlation with rising casualties from an unseen enemy. By 2011 the Islamic

State was influential in its old core areas, and by 2013 was governing territory openly in defiance of the government.[25] In 2014, Mosul fell as part of a wider collapse of government forces.

To summarize the brief movement history described above in Maoist terms, the Islamic State *built* a widespread network of ideological fighters that thrived in the chaotic environment of Iraq (Phase 1), *expanding* into a national network with a strong bureaucracy and organization supporting its operations (Phase 2). The tribal backlash forced it to return to the build phase, where the leadership analyzed the problem and addressed the fissures within their community. Iraqi political dysfunction and a failed reconciliation allowed the movement to use sectarianism as a lever to return to the second phase. Conditions in Syria provided supplies, money, and a new flow of foreign fighters to enable the Islamic State to initiate a *decisive* campaign that secured the political and environmental conditions for their establishment of the caliphate (Phase 3). In the next section, the strategic-operational nexus of the Islamic State's execution of Mao's framework will be explained in detail by phase of historical evolution[26] (Figure 1).

*Figure 1: Three Phases of Revolutionary Warfare [27]*

| | Ph 1 - Building | Ph 2 - Expansion | Ph 1 -- Preserving | Ph 2 - Expansion2 | Ph 3 - Decisive |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Years: | 2002-2005 | 2005-2007 | 2008-2011 | 2011-2013 | 2013-2016 |
| Leadership | Abu Musab Zarqawi | Zarqawi/Abu Omar | Omar/Hamza | Abu Bakr | Abu Bakr |

## The Ebb and Flow of the Islamic State Movement

*"The basic tactic…is constant activity and movement." Mao Tse-Tung, On Guerrilla Warfare [28]*

The initial political agenda of the Islamic State movement was ambitious, with a goal of growing from just a few foreign fighters and local hosts to domination of the Iraqi resistance to the occupation. Zarqawi's group had valuable experience in clandestine operations but had to outpace the reorganizing Ba'athists, rival Islamists, and a fledgling Iraqi government while battling a very capable foreign military coalition. Furthermore, unlike other groups who had various degrees of interest in power sharing with the national government, Zarqawi's group maintained the revolutionary goal of replacing it with a Salafi influenced state run according to the "prophetic method."

To accomplish this, the Islamic State's political efforts were five-fold: it had to frustrate and weaken the growing power of the government and its security forces, recruit from rival resistance groups, foster an exaggerated perception of Sunni alienation, provoke an overreaction from Shia militias, and convince the United States to withdraw from Iraq.[29]

Zarqawi's small group began its military campaign with a strong notion of neutralizing the tremendous technological capabilities of the United States as observed first hand in Afghanistan in late 2001.[30] Ceding the day to day struggle (sniping and road side bombs) to local insurgent groups, Zarqawi's group focused on high visibility attacks against symbolic targets using 'precision guided' suicide bombers and special operations that produced media attention and popularity among resistance sympathizers.[31] The end result of these actions would discredit the state's authority and legitimacy, and divide elements of the population against each other.

This type of military strategy is summarized in the book *Management of Strategy*, written by al Qaeda strategist Abu Bakr Naji, and propagates a controversial and violent method for destroying both the government and society before starting anew.[32] Interestingly, the Islamic State media disputes the notion that this book was influential, writing

> *It is important to note that contrary to Western media claims, this book never defined the methodology of the mujahidin. The top Islamic State leadership – including Shaykh Abu Musab al Zarqawi – did not recommend al Suri's book. As for the concise but beneficial 100 page book titled Management of Savagery by an unknown author who only went by the penname Abu Bakr Naji, then when Shaykh al Zarqawi read this book he commented, "it is as if the author knows what I'm planning." Note: Although Naji's book describes very precisely the overall strategy of the mujahidin, Naji fell into some errors in his discussions on issues related to the takfir of parties who forcefully resist the Shariah and its laws.[33]*

The ideological minders of the Islamic State have disavowed both Suri and Naji's works due to philosophical differences, but there is an implicit acknowledgement that Zarqawi's early military strategy is highly similar to the concepts in Naji's book. Furthermore, there is some evidence that it has been used as teaching aids fairly recently, despite the "errors."[34]

The expertise of jihadists from previous conflicts mixed with one of professional soldiers and intelligence professionals created a potent special operations capability in one other area: assassinations.[35] According to Lia, one al Suri Afghan lecture was titled: "terrorism is a religious duty, and assassination is a Prophetic tradition."[36] The Islamic State created assassination brigades as early as 2004, in order to target Shia militias whose anti-Sunni activities often drove members to the movement.[37] Special brigades began to proliferate, targeting Iraqi Islamic Party (Muslim Brotherhood) members, communists, Iraqi politicians, judges, municipal employees, senior defense and police officials, poll workers, female spies, and later Sunni Awakening council leaders.[38]

Eliminating enemies creates opportunities for access to the population, and the Islamic State was a frequent experimenter and innovator in the creation and structure of its influence campaign. While Abdullah Azzam's use of propaganda to mobilize the Sunni ummah to come and fight in Afghanistan during the Soviet era was an inspiration, the Islamic State built on this precedent to integrate all of the lines of effort together: political, social, military, and economic. Ingram divided the strategic logic of the Islamic State's media strategy into two distinct categories: one pragmatic and the other perceptual. Islamic State's pragmatic appeals focused on stability, security, and economic means; its perceptual appeals highlight sectarian and ethnic divides while championing the group as the only viable protector of Sunni Muslims from a variety of threats.[39]

A successful influence campaign would help the Islamic State alter the social fabric of Iraq, an ideological requirement but also a political one – since in post 2003 Iraq the Sunnis that made up the movement were a demographic minority. This potential for social conflict is what Mao called a "contradiction," and could be used for mobilization purposes by flexible practitioners.[40] Iraq historically had a latent sectarian cleavage within Iraqi Muslims that had grown in salience following the Iranian revolution and the 1991 uprisings throughout Iraq.[41] Therefore it is likely that Zarqawi's fixation on the "dangerous" Shia as an important lever to pry Iraqi Sunnis away from the government was much more strategic and informed than it was a deeply held and irrational belief.[42] Finally, the Islamic State's economic goal was to quickly become an independent movement devoid of outside influence, in order to protect the movement's credibility, legitimacy, and authority.

Given this brief summary of the Islamic State's policies and strategy, the next section will explain the execution of what Fishman calls "the Master Plan," by references to Maoist phases of evolution from 2002 to the present.[43] The idea is not to present a comprehensive history, but rather communicate the interplay between the different lines of effort (political, military, influence, social, self-sufficiency) and how these efforts fared after the inevitable pushback by opponents and the environment. As one distinguished strategist reminds us, "the directions which war takes are unpredictable, because its nature is defined by the competition between two opposing elements, with each side doing its best to prevent the other achieving its objectives."[44]

*Figure 2: Phase 1- Building the Islamic State [45]*

| Ph 1 - Building | 2002-2005 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Political** | **Military** | **Socio-political** | **Influence** | **Self Sufficiency** |
| recruiting | small insurgent cells | integration with Sunni tribes | indoctrinate members | external assistance |
| formulate Doctrine | assassinations of key figures, collaborators | proselytize (dawa) | create media wing | |
| build/subsume networks | high visibility terror attacks | experiment with Sharia law | name branding | |

The primary focus during the building phase was on recruiting, especially among the very extensive underground Salafi network that had existed during Saddam's era.[46] During this time period, Zarqawi lieutenants Abu Muhammad al Lubnani and Abu Anas al Shami recruited the future leadership of the Islamic State, including Abu Omar al Baghdadi, al Adnani, and many others who would go on to dominate the leadership in 2014.[47]

It is probably not a surprise that the military campaign got ahead of the rest of the efforts, and as such Zarqawi wisely chose to forgo claims of credit for the UN, Jordanian Embassy, and Imam Ali Mosque bombings in his earliest military operations in the summer of 2003, patiently waiting until he had a functioning media department before making retroactive claims and announcing the "formation" of his group in January 2004.[48]

Recruiting amongst the former underground Salafists and extreme Sunni rejectionists was much easier than convincing the Iraqi Sunni to eschew the 2005 elections. The movement's main political rival was the Iraqi Islamic Party, whose leaders aimed to dominate the 2005 elections in the majority Sunni provinces. Since the Islamic State's ideology ruled elections to be forbidden, a careful application of violence and threats to this problem resulted in a de facto Sunni boycott of the elections that further alienated Sunnis from a now unrepresentative government.[49]

The relative success of the movement's political/military/influence efforts were counterbalanced by poor relations with Sunni tribes that were hostile to the initial governing experiments of the first Islamic State. Efforts to forcibly change the social mores of the population failed. Tribal norms did not match with the strict Sharia law that accompanied early Islamic State control of al Qaim, Ramadi, and Baqubah, and this friction fueled tribal resentment against the Islamic State.[50] Also, the group's drive for self-sufficiency lagged these other efforts, forcing Zarqawi to officially and belatedly join Al Qaeda to secure funding from the larger movement despite substantial ideological and strategic differences.[51] The Islamic State's late divorce from Al Qaeda in 2013 does not reflect the true nature of this dysfunctional relationship, which had soured as early as 2006 – a symptom of the Islamic State's desire to operate independent of outside influence.

*Figure 3: Phase 2 – Expansion (2005-2007)*

| Ph 2 - Expansion | 2005-2007 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political | Military | Socio-political | Influence | Self Sufficiency |
| mergers | platoon operations | subsume tribes | expanded media organization | income generation |
| establish Islamic state | assassination brigades | capitalize on sectarianism | | booty collection/extortion networks |
| elect proto-caliph | industrial suicide bombing | impose Sharia in occupied areas | | |
| bureaucratization | air defense/artillery units | | | |
| contest elections | sectarian attacks on pilgrims, shrines | | | |

By 2006 the group's Shura council had crafted a merger with dozens of smaller Iraqi groups, formed a political front, declared "statehood," and attempted to appeal to Iraqi nationalists by selecting Abu Omar al Baghdadi – an Anbari from Haditha–as Zarqawi's replacement.[52] The attempt to declare an Islamic State was a political gamble, but a calculated one designed to highlight the uniqueness of a seductive and popular aim of the movement, the establishment of a future caliphate.[53] Meanwhile, the high death tolls of the sectarian civil war fueled a growing sense of crisis in Iraq, a situation rife with opportunities for revolutionaries.

At this point, the Islamic State of Iraq was growing in military capability, infrastructure, and becoming self-reliant due to the development of a large extortion enterprise in the midst of the chaos, fueled in part by an innovative effort to profit from the selling of war "booty."[54] Its media empire expanded to incorporate provincial media wings as well as its own video production company (al Furqan), and eventually produced over 1000 products in 2007.[55]

As often is the case, an overreliance on military force contained the seeds of a backlash. The Islamic State's reliance on assassination as a tactic to eliminate its enemies in the government grew to include tribal figures that failed to cooperate, which in turn sparked a growing tribal resistance counter-movement that was angry at the flouting of tribal customs, the loss of black market income, and the alienation of powerful Sunni tribal sheikhs who correctly saw for themselves only a restrained future in any Islamic State. Rival resistance groups that had soured of working with the Islamic State and were tired of its arrogance and brutality joined the tribes in driving it out of Sunni population areas.[56] As a result of this setback, the Islamic State conducted a slow, general retreat to remote rural areas in Iraq to avoid annihilation at the hands of the coalition and its new Sahwa (Awakening) allies.[57]

*Figure 4: Phase 1 – Preservation (2008-2011)*

| Ph 1 -- Preserving | 2008-2011 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political | Military | Socio-political | Influence | Self Sufficiency |
| justify state | counter-Sahwa campaign | reconcile with select tribes | counter-Sahwa campaign | extortion/black market profits |
| recruit tribes/former resistance | sticky bomb - IED assassination | demonize democracy (contrasting form) | decentralization to provincial media | energy focus (N. Iraq) |
| recruit prisoners | high visibility terror attacks | | thematic videos | |
| frustrate reconciliation | | | | |
| lawfare/subversion | | | | |

The loss of core areas in Anbar, Babil, and Diyala, the desertion of many of its fighters, and the difficulty of operating amongst government informants required the Islamic State to return to the *building* and *preservation* phase.[58] To reestablish a base of support within the Sunni community, emir Abu Omar al Baghdadi prioritized the dismantling of the Sahwa movement through a more focused assassination campaign that vetted all killings of key Sahwa sheikhs.[59] As the movement gained space to breathe, it began to reestablish shadow governments to experiment with the application of services, justice, and population control. Most of this experimentation happened in the only remaining urban area it had significant influence, Mosul.

The incipient Sunni/tribal civil war that festered after 2006 was a natural reaction to the movement's obsessive desire to alter the social fabric without the appropriate means to do so.[60] The Islamic State's failure to forcibly bend the tribes, like Saddam Hussein's earlier failures, influenced the leadership to prioritize dawa (proselytization) and Islamic education over a forced implementation of sharia law, which could be delayed until the decisive phase when resistance to sharia by the population would be more subdued due to power and control dynamics.[61] Abu Omar also mandated the careful recruitment of Sahwa tribes back to the Islamic State by manipulating inner tribal power dynamics.[62]

The Islamic State's acceptance of asymmetric battle doctrine was complete enough that there were no attempts to conduct large conventional attacks in this stage of weakness. Instead, its terror campaign moved to center stage of their activity, in order to boost propaganda efforts. Captured documents indicate much of the terror was about recruiting former fighters to come back by convincing them the fight was not over.[63] A vibrant cell led by Hudayfa al Batawi in Baghdad pulled off a variety of spectacular attacks against churches and government buildings in the city during 2010; this helped maintain the belief that the group was alive and regenerating from its defeat.[64]

During this crucial period, the movement benefited from a series of mistakes by its opponents. To regain some of its fighters, the Islamic State conducted over a dozen documented prison breaks, freeing thousands of veterans due to lax security.[65] In addition to this influx, over 20,000 prisoners were released between 2008-2010 into an environment with weak rule of law practices and no monitoring of parolees.[66] There is significant evidence that a majority of the current leadership of the Islamic State movement were among these former prisoners that quickly returned to the fight.[67]

Internally, the group refined its vertically integrated, centrally managed structure with functional bureaus in order to effectively control territory.[68] This organizational form was copied largely from al Qaeda, reinforcing the notion that much of the Islamic State's influences come from its members with experience in Afghanistan with the larger jihadist movement.[69] Often described as a shadowy network dependent on personal ties, the Islamic State in reality has a sophisticated bureaucracy and hierarchy to control the excesses

of subordinates.[70] The discipline and control wielded by the Islamic State leadership at times compares favorably against the actions of a notoriously corrupt Iraqi government and a brutal Assad regime.[71]

The combination of returning and new members, with a steady flow of funds from its ever expanding extortion networks, set the stage for the Islamic State to begin the second expansion in its history despite its loss of some very key leaders to coalition efforts in 2010.[72]

*Figure 5: Phase 2 - Second Expansion (2011-2013)*

| Ph 2 - Expansion2 | 2011-2013 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Political** | **Military** | **Socio-political** | **Influence** | **Self Sufficiency** |
| expand into Syria | Breaking Walls (prisoner break out) | reconcile with tribes/armed groups | transition to social media (Twitter) | extortion/black market profits |
| exploit Sunni disenfranchisement | focus on ISF | contrast with Arab Spring | experimentation | |
| revitalize networks | platoon operations | | | |
| test governance in certain areas | special operations raids | | | |
| expand shadow governance | | | | |

During this second expansion, the leadership of the Islamic State put their increasing manpower and funding to good use. The new emir, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, was a veteran movement member groomed by the previous leadership for the role,[73] serving in logistics, media, Sharia councils, and as the emir of the heart of the shadow state–Mosul.[74] The campaign against the Sahwa went into overdrive and insurgent attacks against Iraq security forces operating near Islamic State core areas increased dramatically. By 2011, Islamic State attacks in Mosul were three times higher than in Diyala province and 50% more than all of Anbar province.[75] The withdrawal of U.S. forces also gave the Islamic State much more ability to maneuver in larger and larger forces without fear of air attacks.

The collapse of the Assad government in Eastern Syria during this year was a boon for the Islamic State; it used its superior organization, experience, and logistical network to capture large quantities of arms in Syria and capitalize on a renewed flow of foreign fighters responding to the Syrian crisis. On the upswing by mid-2011, Abu Bakr felt comfortable sending his emir of Mosul and six senior officers to Syria to exploit the crisis and establish a cell that became Jabhat al Nusra.[76] Eventually, these interior lines allowed the Islamic State to gain experience at mobile warfare, which was put to use in a combined guerrilla and small conventional unit campaign aiming to again control territory in its old core areas.

The veteran leadership secured in prison breaks and releases, along with the opportunity to conduct platoon sized operations in Syria, facilitated the transition of military activities to the mobile warfare required as part of the Maoist decisive phase. As one observer noted, the "jihadists do not legitimize themselves through statecraft. They draw legitimacy from the battlefield."[77]

One example of the aggressive type of operations the Islamic State was conducting by 2012 was their company-sized raid on the entire Haditha police establishment, including a barracks, multiple checkpoints, and a headquarters. Filming and later publicizing the entire night raid, the special operators–disguised as Iraqi police–captured and executed 25 policemen and two police commanders before withdrawing with all the captured equipment.[78] This wakeup call went unheeded, but foreshadowed a growing capability that would explode in 2013.

*Figure 6: Phase 3 – Decisive (2013-2016)*

| Ph 3 - Decisive | 2013-2016 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political | Military | Socio-political | Influence | Self Sufficiency |
| govern newly captured cities | mobile campaign combined with various local forces | create new Islamic Society | deterrence Videos | antiquities sales |
| establish caliphate | short occupations of cities | eliminate competing influences | atrocity Terror | expanded booty operations from captured territory |
| promote caliph | defending gains | celebrate Sharia as law of the State | influence citizens using kiosks, direct media | |
| provide services, law, order | use of suicide bombers in defense | | | |
| control population | genocide in controlled territory | | | |

The Islamic State's deliberate transition into what Mao called the "strategic offensive" phase allowed it to control an increasing amount of territory in 2013, including parts of Syria, Anbar and the "Triangle of Death" south of Baghdad.[79] In other areas like Diyala province, its military units were patiently testing the waters by occupying towns during periodic ventures from secure bases before withdrawing again.[80]

While the establishment of the caliphate was not declared until late June 2014, it is clear that the Islamic State crafted a methodical and successful campaign to build contiguous support zones in both Syria and Iraq in 2013. The establishment of a caliphate enhanced its reputation and persuaded many to come to a land where Muslims could worship according to the Islamic State's own unique religious ideology.[81] Increased control of territory allowed the Islamic State to tax the population and legitimize its rule, while contributing to self-sufficiency. The successful seizure of large oil producing infrastructures allowed the group to expand its revenue generation to a point where it would outperform at least 30 countries in the world in gross domestic product in 2015, with over $2.2 trillion in energy reserves, minerals, and cash.[82]

Control of large populations for the first time since 2006 meant more than resource extraction; now the Islamic State could directly communicate with the people through the use of kiosks, roving propaganda teams in public, and endless public ceremonies upholding the values of the movement.[83] The Islamic State's media machine went from producing 1000 events a year in 2007 to producing that much a month in 2015 in a variety of forms in dozens of new platforms and formats. More than half of these products depicted utopian images of life in the 'caliphate,' stressing economic activity, law and order, and the ability to worship according to the 'correct method' without interference.[84]

Uniquely and rather unprecedented, the Islamic State has calculated that atrocity messaging might be acceptable to its supporters in line with Ingram's perceptual appeals concept. In its early phases, the group did not claim attacks against civilian targets, even for many of its signature attacks like suicide bombings.[85] For example, in 2006 the Islamic State strenuously denied the 2006 Samarra "golden" mosque bombing, which is widely attributed to the group.[86] After 2007 this attitude changed, most likely due to the effects of its own ideological teachings and the impact of the sectarian struggle in 2006-2007. There were an increasing number of attack claims against Shia pilgrims after this date, culminating in the horrific Speicher videos which documented the mass killing of over one thousand Shia cadets captured in 2014. The desired effect of social polarization, activated in the form of terrorism as quasi-genocidal levels of terrorism, was mostly complete. [87]

## The New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare

An objective review of the evolution of the Islamic State makes it clear that its leaders have honed and largely perfected the synchronization and execution of Mao's critical elements of revolutionary warfare. Mao's army, once the Japanese invaders were gone, waged a smart campaign against a weak and corrupt regime before achieving success. The Vietnamese communists, facing a much tougher foe, eventually won unification through the use of a largely conventional invasion. In this case study, the Islamic State established a new sovereignty in large parts of two adjoining states within a 12-month period against a state supported by a regional power and a global hegemon.

As this article hopefully chronicled, it was certainly no accident. This was a patient, protracted, and thoughtful campaign worthy of serious study. If so, then what can we learn?

First, that our idealized notion of what constitutes population mobilization needs additional thought. Many researchers dismiss the notion of the Islamic State fitting into a revolutionary model because their use of terror feeds a general perception that groups that need to use terrorism are taking a shortcut. But the Islamic State uses terrorism as a form of "political jujitsu", as McCauley and Moskalenko describe it, using the strength of an opponent (financial and global energy system, air power, powerful social media platforms) against it.[88] If terrorism is mostly part of the military campaign to eviscerate the opponent's state apparatus, and not simply the weapon of the weak, then shouldn't researchers try to gauge the ability of the Islamic State to mobilize the Sunni population behind them? Instead, current research tends to hyper-focus on foreign fighter flows rather than indigenous recruiting.[89]

One poll taken of Mosul residents in late 2015 found that while most citizens oppose the Islamic State's rule, a growing number report that "life is better;" (39%) accepting Islamic State values as their values. This polling suggested that although support for the Islamic State was somewhat low, it still polled higher than the Iraqi security forces or the previous government.[90] Methodological problems with any survey of occupied Mosul aside, these data should suggest that the Islamic State's return to dominance in Sunni areas of Iraq was fed by some measure of popular support, a substantial local recruitment of fighters, and a strong disapproval and distrust of the counterinsurgents. The ever-rising estimates of the number of Islamic State fighters are more proof of this.[91]

Interestingly, terror bombings in Shia areas of Iraq and violent propaganda videos do not seem to negatively impact the local population's perception of the Islamic State. While this type of violence seems to have influenced the decline in popularity of the group in the wider Arab and Muslim worlds (favourable views of IS have shrunk to single digits in most countries), it has had little resonance in Mosul – whose citizens are understandably more concerned about coalition bombing of the city.[92]

A second point, that follows this observation, is the weakness of any counterterrorism strategy against a movement like the Islamic State. It is simply strategically insufficient to deal with a sophisticated, financially sufficient, media savvy movement with a deep leadership bench.[93] Efforts that discuss the defeat and destruction of the Islamic State will therefore require a much more robust set of means and a much different timeline, or goals will need to be modified.

Next, it is easy to predict how the Islamic State will react to its current difficulties. As Mohammad al Adnani alluded to in the article's first quotation, insurgents do not have a choice when faced with direct pressure other than to melt away to fight again, in another time and place. If this case study illustrates anything, these sanctuaries will be within Iraq and Syria just like they were before, not in some far away location where the local dynamics are unfamiliar. The Islamic State will return to either Phase 2 or even Phase 1 if its control mechanisms in the urban areas collapses.

Finally, the Islamic State's methodical campaign of violence against soft targets that belong to the opposing government's control mechanisms seems to have had a significant impact over time – overcoming any perceived costs of its prolific use of terror, even those directed against the population. Bernard Fall noticed a similar effect in the Viet Minh campaign against the French and their native forces in Indochina, which led to a strategic surprise and sudden collapse.[94] The Viet Cong were even more relentless, carrying on a similar terror and assassination campaign for five years to keep the struggle alive while undermining their enemy. [95] The evidence shows that this is exactly what happened in Mosul and other areas of Sunni Iraq, which the Islamic State slowly consolidated and patiently cultivated in a masterful, combined campaign of terror, assassination, limited conventional attacks, and the harnessing of tribal and public support.

## Conclusion

The sad fact is that most observers missed a great deal of this strategy. There is some power in a simply crafted and easily taught ideology when combined with a brutal application of the methods of revolutionary warfare. Dismissal of either of these relics from the past has come at a cost of understanding the rise of the Islamic State, a rise in this particular case that demonstrates the seductiveness of what Hassan calls the hybridization of doctrinaire Salafism for Muslims oppressed by authoritarian or sectarian governments.[96]

This lesson is applicable in examining the civil wars in Syria and Libya. Policy makers should use this understanding to closely examine the groups competing for power. Are they ideological, and what kind of methods are they using in Syria to consolidate power, govern, educate, proselytize, and influence? What kind of state do they propose as a political end state? The evolution of the Islamic State's doctrine is surely influencing groups like Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham, who are learning from and improving on the model that the Islamic State has updated. As this article painfully illustrated, the next generation of Salafi jihadist revolutionaries will most likely learn from the mistakes of the past and be even more difficult opponents.[97]

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## Notes

[1] One popular article is Graeme Wood's "What ISIS really wants," *The Atlantic,* March 2015; URL: http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/

[2] Eric Schmitt, "In Battle to Defang ISIS, U.S. Targets Its Psychology," *New York Times,* 28 Dec. 2014, A1.

[3] The operational level of war refers to the planning and conduct of campaigns, and exists below the strategic level and above the tactical battlefield.

[4] Abu Mohammad al Adnani al Shami, "And Those Who Lived In Faith Would Live Upon Evidence," *Jihadology.net,* ed. Aaron Zelin, 21 May 2016. http://jihadology.net/2016/05/21/new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-al-shami-and-those-who-lived-in-faith-would-live-upon-evidence/

[5] Turki bin Mubarek al Benali, "Biography of IS Spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani ash Shami," posted to Justpaste.it on 1 Nov. 2014.

[6] Michael Ryan*, Decoding Al Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America.* Columbia University Press, 2013.

[7] Stathis Kalyvas, "Is ISIS a Revolutionary Group and if Yes, What are the Implications?" *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9, (4) 2015, 42-47.

[8] James Dubik, "By any other name, war is still war," *Army Magazine,* June 2016, 17.

[9] Peter Curry, "Small Wars are Local: Debunking Current Assumptions about Countering Small Armed Groups," in Jeffre Norwitz (Ed.) *Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency.* Washington DC: GPO, 2008, 149-159.

[10] Robert J. Bunker, *Old and New Insurgency Forms*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2016, 36.

[11] Mao Tse Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare,* translated by Samuel B. Griffith II. Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1992.

[12] Samuel Griffith (Ed.), "Introduction to First Edition," in Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerilla Warfare,* 56.

[13] Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change.* Stanford University Press/Longman Group, 1983, 3.

[14] Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson, "The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1972, 384.

[15] Johnson, 153.

[16] William Andrews, *The Village at War: Vietnamese Communists Revolutionary Activity in Dinh Tuong Province 1960-1964.* Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973, 96.

[17] Ryan, 85.

[18] Saif al Adl, "My experience with Abu Musab al Zarqawi," translated by L. Othman, edited by H. Ingram, originally published in 2005.

[19] Al Musab al Suri, 'Lessons learned from the armed Jihad in Syria.' CTC West Point, document #AFGP-2002-600080, 2002. URL: https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Lessons-Learned-from-the-Jihad-Ordeal-in-Syria-Translation.pdf

[20] Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. Regan Arts, 2015, 13.

[21] United States Marine Corps, 1MEF G-2, "State of the Insurgency in al Anbar," 2006. URL: http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/.../marines_iraq_document_020707.pdf.

[22] Ahmed Hashim, "Mobilization and Ideology in the Iraqi Insurgency: The Role of Islam," *Islamist Politics in the Middle East*, 2012, 161.

[23] Haroro Ingram and Craig Whiteside, "Don't kill the caliph: the Islamic State and the pitfalls of leadership decapitation," *War on the Rocks,* 2 June 2016; URL: http://warontherocks.com/2016/06/dont-kill-the-caliph-the-islamic-state-and-the-pitfalls-of-leadership-decapitation/

[24] Stathis Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, 112-13.

[25] Craig Whiteside, "ISIL's Small Ball Warfare: An effective way to get back into a ballgame, *War on the Rocks,* Apr 2015; URL: http://warontherocks.com/2015/04/isils-small-ball-warfare-an-effective-way-to-get-back-into-a-ballgame/

[26] This article takes a longitudinal view of the movement, an approach which has been supported by the research of AQI, MSC, and ISI captured documents. For an example of other scholars using the same approach, see Patrick Johnston, Jacob Shapiro, Howard Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle Jung, Patrick Ryan, Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005-2010,* RAND Corporation, 2016, 11-12.

[27] The data for this chart was derived from primary source research derived from the author's work: "The Smiling, Scented Men: The Political Worldview of the Islamic State of Iraq, 2003-2013," dissertation, Washington State University, 2014; "Genocide as Terrorism" (see note 41); and "The Return of Revolutionary Warfare," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, forthcoming Summer 2016. The categories were also informed by Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," Brookings, 2015 (political); Martha Cottam and Joe Huseby, *Confronting Al Qaeda: The Sunni Awakening and American Strategy in Al Anbar*, 2016, (social); Jessica Stern and JM Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015 (influence), and Johnson et al, *The Foundations of the Islamic State*, note 24, (economic).

[28] Mao Tse-Tung, 78.

[29] Many of these strategic objectives can be found in this publication: Abu Hamza al Baghdadi, "Why do we fight?" Legal Committee of Al Qa'ida Organization in the Land of Two Rivers, 17 Oct 2005, originally posted online by the Islamic Renewal Organization forum at tajdeed.org.uk.

[30] Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad, the life of al Qaeda strategist Abu Musab al Suri*, Columbia University Press, 2008, 363.

[31] For Islamic State movement's utilization of suicide bombers, see Mohammad Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq,* 2007; for a comparison of Islamic State (AQI) claims versus others. See Katherine Seifert and Clark McCauley, "Suicide Bombers in Iraq, 2003-2010: Disaggregating targets can reveal insurgent motives and priorities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (5), 2014; for examples of special operations capturing and torturing American soldiers, read Dexter Filkins, "Bodies of G.I.'s Show Signs of Torture, Iraqi General Says," The New York Times, 20 Jun 2006; URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/20/world/20cnd-iraq.html?_r=0 and Damien Cave, "Iraq Insurgent Group Claims it Killed Missing U.S. Soldiers," The New York Times, 5 Jun 2007; URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/05/world/middleeast/05iraq.html

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[34] Hassan Hassan, *The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context*, Carnegie, Jun 2016; URL: http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/13/sectarianism-of-islamic-state-ideological-roots-and-political-context/j1iy

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[36] Lia, 385.

[37] Malcom Nance, *The Terrorists of Iraq: Inside the Strategy and Tactics of the Iraq Insurgency 2003-2014.* CRC Press, 2014, 141.

[38] Whiteside, Smiling Scented Men, 148.

[39] Haroro Ingram, "The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operations,", 729-752, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 69(6) 25 Aug 2015; URL: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10357718.2015.1059799

[40] Chalmers Johnson, "The Third Generation of Guerilla Warfare," in Sam Sarkesian (Ed.), *Revolutionary Guerilla Warfare*, Precedent, 1975, 357-373.

[41] Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions in Unity*, Columbia/Hurst, 2011.

[42] Abu Musab al Zarqawi. 'Zarqawi's Cry'. Captured document released by the CPA Iraq, Haverford College Global Terrorism Research Project, 14 Feb 2004; URL: https://dsdrupal.haverford.edu/aqsi/aqsi-statement/596

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[49] Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS.* Doubleday, 2015, 176-179.

[50] Cottam and Huseby, 69-96.

[51] McCants, 11-15.

[52] Haroro Ingram and Craig Whiteside, "Don't Kill the Caliph!"

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[59] Abu Khaldun, 'Synopsis of the Relations Committee in Baghdad's Southern Belt,' CRRC Document AQ PMPR-D-001-717, est. 2009.

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[61] Islamic State of Iraq, "Analysis of the State of ISI," Harmony Program Document, p. 24; URL: https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/analysis-of-the-state-of-isi-english-translation-2.

[62] Craig Whiteside, The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare, *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27:5, Aug 2016.

[63] Islamic State of Iraq, "Letter to Emir of Faithful from Abu Ibrahim," Captured Records Research Center, document number AQ-MSLF-D-001-681.

[64] Islamic State, "Among the Believers Are Men: Hudhayfah al Battawi," Dabiq 9, 21 May 2015, available at Aaron Zelin's Jihadology.net; URL: http://jihadology.net/2015/05/21/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-9/

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[69] Johnson et al., *Foundations of the Islamic State*, 8 and 81-83.

[70] Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*. Princeton University Press, 2013, 92; Johnston et al., *Foundations of the Islamic State*, 67-77.

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