

The Dawa'ish: A Collective Profile of IS Commanders

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Abstract:

Based on the scrutiny of daily Iraqi newspapers, this article offers a collective profile of the commanders in the Islamic State (IS), the so-called Dawa'ish. From the highest level to the lowest ranks, Iraqis form the large majority of the commanders of IS in both Iraq and Syria. After determining the national background and discussing the role of non-Iraqis in the ranks of IS, the article focuses on the social, tribal, and regional backgrounds of the Iraqis in IS' ranks, providing in-depth information on the social and political background of IS in Iraqi society.

Keywords: Islamic State, Iraq, Ba'ath, terrorist profile

Introduction

This research is the first attempt to provide a comprehensive collective profile of commanders and leaders of the Islamic State (IS). The IS is a secretive organization and the available information, even on the top echelon of its leaders, is extremely scant. This article is based on an inventory of over 600 names of commanders and other functionaries of the IS, down to the level of local commanders in a small village. Together, the men in the files - many of them killed - constitute[d] the backbone of the IS. The study of such a large number of IS commanders produces a collective profile which offers a more accurate reflection of the nature of the IS than previous research.

As the study was based on Iraqi media, most of the information refers to IS commanders in Iraq. Unlike other studies of the IS command,[1] this study covers the entire period between 2006 and 2017. The collection of names continues and the inventory is updated daily. The main focus is on the Iraqis in the IS command, as they constitute the overwhelming majority on all levels of the organization. The research analyzes the ethnic origins of the Iraqi commanders, their previous occupations before 2003, their tribal affiliations and regional origins. All these categories help explain the intricate connections of the IS to Sunni society in Iraq - an issue that often remains unanswered and from which other questions derive: Is the IS a regionally based organization? Is it tribal? What is the background of its commanders? Where were they before 2003? How religious are they really? Finally, the research will examine the number of commanders serving or not serving in their places of origin, thus examining if the organization capitalizes on local cadres and encourages the surge of locally based groups or not.

Methodology

The research is based on the daily collection of names and information on IS administrators and commanders from the Iraqi press and media, in Arabic, for over a year. The names were verified by informed sources in Iraq. Further information, particularly on senior leaders, was collected from Western sources. The Iraqi newspapers used were two dailies, "Azzaman" and "al-Mada", known for being relatively independent (Azzaman is considered "moderate Sunni"). Both feature a daily report, covering the events of the war. Azzaman usually references the announcements of the various military spokesmen while al-Mada is more investigative. The Iraqi TV channels used for this research project are "al-Hurra" and "Anbar TV", the local station of the province of Anbar. The author avoided the official "al-Iraqiya" and other channels serving as organs of parties and militias. The IS hardly provides information on its cadres; therefore the rare IS sources used here were official documents, courtesy of Aymenn al-Tamimi.[2]

The newspapers and media usually report the killing or arrest of a commander. For the purpose of this research, the fate of the commander is of secondary importance. What matters is his name or “*Nomme de Guerre*” (in Arabic *Kuniya*) and his role in the organization. Whereas the fate of that person cannot be verified immediately, there is no reason to doubt the credibility of the Iraqi sources with regard to the name, *Kuniya* and the role of the commander. In most cases, report on the killing of the commander in an airstrike would be part of a tediously long summary of the previous day’s military events. The commander would appear with his *Kuniya* and sometimes also with his real name. When the commander is senior, the Iraqi media would mention his pre-2003 biography. To avoid the risk of “fake names” entering the database, names were daily verified with informed sources in Iraq. Based on my experience and consultation with Iraqis, Iraqi sources providing information were graded according to their credibility: information by the Shi’ia militias was viewed as much less credible than information originating from the Iraqi Military Intelligence.

Names and *Kuniyas* can teach us a great deal about IS cadres. They usually indicate the nationality of the commander. In this category, *Kuniyas* in which the person states his nationality (e.g., Abu Tammam al-Sa’udi) are even more telling than real names. Names and *Kuniyas* often reveal the regional origin of a commander (e.g., Abu ‘Ali al-Anbari), but also the tribal affiliation of a person (e.g., Abu Arkan al-‘Ameri from the Albu ‘Amer tribe). Finally, names can also tell us something about the ethnic origin of a commander (e.g., Abu Muslim al-Turkmani). When all this information is compared with the area that was designated to that commander, the researcher can learn whether the person was posted in his place of origin or away from it. This requires a measure of familiarity with Iraq’s tribes and communities.

Some IS commanders have or had more than one *Kuniya*. There is always a risk of duplication in such an inventory. This is more often the case with senior commanders on which we have generally more information, often including the real name. They change, according to their whim, their *Kuniyas*, but the change would often be the use of a different name after the “Abu” and in that case would not make much of a difference - if it is the same person. Otherwise, the person would use a tribal *Kuniya* along with his regional or national one (e.g., Abu Nabil al-Anbari was also known as Abu Mughira al-Qahtani[3] and Abu Yazan al-Humairi; his real name was Wisam ‘Abd al-Zubeidi, indicating affiliation to the Zubeid tribe). Having more *Kuniyas* thus provides more information about a person. For lower ranking commanders only known by their *Kuniyas*, we will probably never know their real names. In most cases, these persons’ names are published only posthumously. Therefore, the chance that they reappear with a new name is slim. Regardless, there is no reason to doubt the information contained in their *Kuniyas*. A *Kuniya* or a name with no *Laqab* (surname) is useless, unless further information is given on the commander in question. If no further information exists, the person is classified as “unknown”.

A “commander” in this inventory would be anybody designated by the Iraqi media as such. The term used for low ranking commanders is “*Qiyadi*” and “*Qiyadi Bariz*” for mid-ranking or senior commanders. Often a *Qiyadi* is killed in an airstrike with his assistants. The number of his assistants is another indication of rank. If the exact role of the *Qiyadi* is mentioned, often with his IS title (Amir, Wali), we can derive his rank by that. This research project also covers non-military civil administrators of the IS: ministers, governors, Qadis, Muftis, heads of departments on all administrative levels, and ideologues. Again, this information was verified with informed sources in Iraq and was generally found to be accurate, with occasional errors regarding the exact role of the commander or whether he was killed or still alive. For the purpose of this study, what matters is that the person was indeed a commander, no matter how prominent. Unfortunately, no similar information exists on Syria, thus this study refers primarily to the IS in Iraq. Tables 1 and 2 provide information about the nationality of all known commanders and of those in the top echelon.

What emerges from the two Tables is that the overwhelming majority of IS commanders and leaders are Iraqis.[4] This can be seen on all levels from the top down. Although these figures mostly refer to Iraq, commentators tend to agree that the picture for Syria may not be very different.[5] Iraqis occupy most of the

Table 1: Islamic State Commanders: Nationality

Iraqis:	345
Saudis:	38
Syrians:	27
Egyptians:	24
Chechens:	13
Tunisians:	13
Libyans:	8
Moroccans:	8
Europeans:	8
Jordanians:	6
Kurds:	5
Turks:	4
Palestinians:	3
Kuwaitis:	3
Other nationalities:	19
Unknown nationalities:	107
Total:	631

Table 2: Islamic State Top Echelons*: Nationality

Iraqis:	92
Syrians:	8
Saudis:	8
Egyptians:	3
Jordanians:	2
Chechens:	1
Tadjikis:	1
Europeans:	1
Unknown nationality:	13
Total:	129

* Positions listed in this category include the Caliph, ministers, governors (Wali), and senior military commanders (Amir) only.

commanding positions in Iraq, but also in Syria and beyond - by 2015 some senior Iraqi commanders were sent to assist IS operatives in Libya. Basically, the IS is an Iraqi organization, created in the mayhem of post-2003 Iraq. Since the death of its founder, the Jordanian-Palestinian Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, in 2006, it was led by Iraqis and an Iraqi, Ibrahim 'Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) was responsible for its

current transformation. Under his leadership, the organization settled in Syria and exploited the civil war there to triumphantly return to Iraq in June 2014.

Although pretending to be a global organization, the IS divides his members into natives of Iraq and Syria (*Ansar*) and Jihadis from other countries (*Muhajirin*), thereby implicitly acknowledging the dominance of those native from Iraq and Syria. The number of Syrian commanders is considerably smaller than the Iraqis. Surprisingly, Syrians are only the third nationality. This can be explained by the fact that in Syria rebel Sunnis have multiple other organizations to join, even for those with jihadi inclinations. Additionally, the IS has been a recent arrival to Syria. It arrived there with its Iraqi cadres. Many of its Iraqi commanders were more veteran than the Syrians or used that networking and their leadership skills to recruit other Iraqis - especially ex-Mukhabarat agents - thereby reinforcing the Iraqi contingency. Interestingly, most of the Syrians are confined to media work (the most prominent was Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani - the spokesman of IS) and to the administration (the most prominent being Abu al-Athir al-‘Absi – the ex-governor of Syria, who, prior to his nomination, had also been involved in media work). Very few Syrians are military commanders in Iraq. While some Iraqis were senior governors in Syria, no Syrian so far has been a governor of a *Wilaya* [province] in Iraq. While the discussion of how ‘Iraqi’ the organization is in some other aspects is beyond the scope of this study, Tables 1 & 2 show that the predominance of Iraqis in IS ranks is not just numerical.

The relatively high number of Egyptians and Saudis is certainly connected to the IS heritage of ISI (Islamic State in Iraq) and its predecessor AQI (Al Qaeda in Iraq) which included a large number of recruits from both countries. ISI was at one moment in time even led by an Egyptian, Abu Ayub al-Masri, also known as “Abu Hamza al-Muhajir”. Some of the Saudis are Qadis and Muftis or commanders of the morality police (*Hisba*), providing IS with much needed familiarity with the Wahabi interpretation of the Shari’a. Saudis also figure as recruiters of suicide bombers. Among the smaller national contingents, Chechens, Tunisians and Libyans stand out. Chechens (the most prominent of them was the Georgian convert Abu Omar al-Shishani - commander of the “special battalions”) make the largest ethnic group, behind Arabs and Turkmen (more on these later when discussing ‘ethnic groups’). All of them are military commanders. Tunisian and Libyan commanders represent a large contingency of recruits from these countries in Iraq and Syria. They are both military commanders and functionaries in the IS administration. A large number of Libyans arrived in Iraq around 2003 and joined AQI[6]. Many more recruits moved to the core areas of the IS after 2011. However, none of them attained more than middle ranking positions. Significantly, jihadis from the West and from other parts of Europe are almost totally absent in our list of commanders.[7] Regardless of their notoriety in the West, they seem to be confined to the level of soldiers and suicide bombers of the IS, which is only logical given their low level of military skills and their lack of familiarity with the local environment.

Table 3: IS Iraqi Commanders: Ethnicity in Iraq

Sunni Arab:	319
Turkmen:	19
Kurds*:	7
Unknown:	4

*Kurds were not counted as Iraqis in Table 1. There is no certainty about the state origin of the 7 Kurdish commanders. Because they were active in Iraq, it is reasonable to assume they were all Iraqi Kurds.

Not surprisingly, almost all Iraqi commanders are of Sunni Arab ethnicity in Iraq. Yet the fact that IS is primarily a Sunni organization has not been appreciated properly. Most scholars debate whether the organization is primarily Salafi-Jihadi or ex-Ba’athist, forgetting that Sunnism is the main glue, not only for Iraqi members (Kurds and Turkmen are also Sunni), but for all the other members, regardless of their origins. A significant number of the commanders hail from countries in which the sectarian tensions are very much alive (Syria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, etc.). This explains the blatant sectarian tone of IS propaganda. Ostensibly ethnic-blind, the IS is an Arab organization. Almost all the commanders (from the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe) are Arabs. Therefore, the organization maintains the hegemonic role of Arabs in Islam.

Among the three Sunni ethnicities in Iraq, the number of Turkmen commanders stands out. Furthermore, ten out of the fourteen were from the town of Tal’afar, west of Mosul. Turkmen are Iraq’s third largest ethnic group,[8] much smaller in numbers than the Kurds. Turkmen are divided almost equally along sectarian lines with the Sunnis having a majority of 60 percent. Tal’afar is located along the main road between Mosul and Syria, close to Kurdish areas and to the Yazidi enclave of Jabal Sinjar. Tal’afar profited from commerce with Syria and Turkey but had tense relations with its Kurdish and Yazidi neighbors. Shortly after the U.S. occupation of 2003, it became a center of, often cross-border, jihadist activity. In 2007, the U.S. Army deployed a large force to the town and established a civil administration there. When the Americans withdrew in 2011, the Jihadis returned. Before June 2014, Tal’afar was a mixed town in which Sunni and Shiite Turkmen coexisted with Christians, Kurds, Yazidis, Arabs and other communities. The taking of Tal’afar by ISIS in June 2014 was accompanied by the sectarian and ethnic cleansing of its population. The Shiite Turkmen were massacred or fled and so did all the others, turning Tal’afar into Iraq’s utmost IS stronghold. The Turkmen epitomize the merger of two groups of Iraqis that actually made the IS: the radical Islamists and the mid-ranking officers in the Ba’athist security services. They were also encouraged to join the IS by having some prominent members of their ethnicity in the senior command.[9]

Another town with significant representation among the commanders is Rawa in the western region of Anbar. Eight commanders are from Rawa and all bear the surname al-Rawi. The most prominent was probably Abu Du’aa al-Rawi, the Wali of Baghdad, killed in January 2016. Rawa, is an Iraqi town, whose population shares a regional and local, rather than a tribal, identity. Other towns with local identities are Tikrit, ‘Ana, Hit, al-Dur and Haditha. The number of commanders from Rawa is much higher, indicating a measure of local support in that town, which, by the time of writing these lines, is still under IS control.

Table 4: *Previous Occupations of Iraqi Commanders in the IS*

Students of Islam:	8
Members of Saddam Hussein’s security services:	47
Physicians:	3
Student:	1
Teacher:	1
Agronomist:	1
Worker:	1
Perfumer (‘Attar):	1
Farmer:	1
Engineer:	1
Unknown:	281

Table 4 refers to pre-2003 professional occupations of the Iraqi commanders; although the information is scarce, the two major groups are students of Islam and members of the Ba'athist security forces. After 2003, almost all the commanders shared the same life pattern of engagement in the "jihad" against the new central government and the American occupation force.[10] They were doing so in various organizations: some were members of AQI and constitute the Jihadi core of the IS. Others were members of the Ba'athist armed resistance who decided to join the IS, rather than JRTN (*Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiya* - The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandiya Order), the main armed organization of the Ba'athists. Almost all the IS commanders were inmates of the American prison camp, Camp Bucca, near Basra, which is where all their available snapshot photos were taken. Interestingly, most had not been regular mosque attendees before their arrest.[11] Some of the commanders were also imprisoned, first by the U.S. and later by the Iraqis, and held in high security prisons like Abu Ghraib, Badush, and Tikrit, from which they escaped in highly professional prison-break operations of the IS.[12] Most of them probably suffered some forms of torture by U.S. and Iraqi prison guards, humiliations which often also included sexual aspects. The question of the impact of torture on these men's motivation to join the IS and embark upon a vengeful crusade of violence has never been answered.

According to an IS document, in 2010, shortly after his election as leader of ISI, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi decided to accept a large number of ex-members of the Ba'athist security services after they underwent "repentance" (*Toba*) ceremonies.[13] This rather late merger, occurring shortly before the Syrian civil war of 2011, undoubtedly created the new model of ISIS. This was one of Baghdadi's first moves after becoming the leader in that same year. Baghdadi knew that ISI could not rely exclusively on the jihadists, who often lacked military experience. However, by taking the security servicemen on board, he accepted some risk since their networks and professionalism gave them the ability to oust him.

The foremost representative of the students of Islam in the organization is Baghdadi himself.[14] Two of his uncles served in Saddam Hussein's security services and may have facilitated the merger.[15] The foremost representatives of the members of the security services appear to have been Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, Baghdadi's deputy (killed in August 2015), Abu 'Ali al-Anbari, another deputy and commander of Syria (killed in December 2015), and Abu Bakr al-Anbari, head of the committee of security, defense and intelligence. From the information available, members of the security services outnumber the Iraqi students of Islam. They are all high-ranking members of the IS and can be found at the leadership level of the organization, in senior military command positions in both Iraq and Syria. They are the backbone of the IS. However, the claim that they were senior members of the Ba'athist apparatus is incorrect[16]: the senior members of the Ba'ath party were either arrested, tried and often executed, or joined the JRTN under 'Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, forming a rather exclusive organization. Mainly middle-ranking and low-ranking officers of the security services joined ISI.[17] Most served in the General Intelligence (*Mukhabarat*) and the Army (possibly including the Republican Guards), very few served in the *Amn* and the more exclusive Special Security (*al-Amn al-Khass*), and other services. Under Saddam, the more exclusive services were entirely based on kinship and affiliation to the Albu Nasir, Saddam's own tribe. Saddam's family and tribe are underrepresented in the IS, which explains the absence of members of these services from its ranks.

What role do tribal affiliations play in IS? Table 5 offers some hints.

The question of IS' connection to Iraqi Sunni society puzzles scholars and remains a mystery. Unraveling the tribal origins of the commanders may help explain IS social basis, by focusing on one of Sunni society's basic elements: the tribe. If the IS is indeed working with, and through, the tribes, it could mean that it has a much stronger local support basis in the tribal lands of the Sunni periphery. The provinces of Anbar and Salah al-Din are almost completely tribal. It is not possible to control them without establishing relations with some of the tribes there. The overall picture emerging from Table 5 is one of a great tribal diversification, including at least 34 tribes.

Table 5: *Tribal Origins of Iraqi IS Commanders*

Jabur (Mosul and Kirkuk areas):	20
‘Ubeid (Kirkuk area)	14
Jumaila (Falluja area):	11
Albu Bali (Ramadi area):	8
Albu ‘Issa (Falluja area):	6
Dulaim (Anbar province):	5
Salman (Samawa area South West of Iraq):	4
Karabla (Western Anbar):	4
Saba’awiyeen (Mosul area):	4
Albu ‘Assaf (Ramadi area):	4
Jagha’ifa (Haditha area):	4
Janabiyeen (South of Baghdad):	4
Hiyaliyeen (Mosul area):	3
Albu Badri (From Samaraa, Baghdadi’s tribe):	3
Halabisa (Falluja area):	3
Bani ‘Izz (Diyala area):	3
Qaraghul (Anbar province):	2
Mushahada (north of Baghdad, Taji area):	2
Albu Fahd (Ramadi area):	2
Albu Nasir (Tikrit area, Saddam Hussein’s tribe):	2
Albu ‘Alwan (Falluja area):	2
Albu ‘Amer (Falluja area):	2
Gharir (South of Baghdad, Babylon province):	2
Albu Firaj (Anbar and Diyala):	2
Different tribes (one from each tribe):	51
Unknown:	151

In other words, the IS does not rely on a single tribe, and in most cases its commanders may not represent their tribes. So far, IS only had a modest success in recruiting entire tribes to work - or even just cooperate - with it, as reflected in Table 5. In relation to its size, the biggest tribe on the list is the Jumaila from the Falluja area. In July 2015, the Iraqi government announced that 33 tribal Shaykhs from Anbar who allegedly swore allegiance to the IS, were to be ostracized. The only one mentioned by name was Sheikh Rafi’ Mishhin al-Jumayli, a sheikh of the Jumaila and son of its paramount chief, indicating a measure of cooperation between a branch of the tribe and the IS organization.[18] According to the Iraqi daily newspaper “Al Mada”, the Jumaila was one of the Anbari tribes who were “neutral” between the government and IS,[19] again indicating that parts of the tribe may be more supportive of the IS. Historically, the Jumaila was the tribe of ‘Abd al-Salam and his brother ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Arif, presidents of Iraq between 1963 and 1968. Their center is Karma, near Falluja, previously under IS control.[20] Their joining the IS may have been part of tribal party politics, preceding the taking of Falluja by the IS in February 2014. All of the Jumailis in the IS are military commanders posted in the territory of their own tribe. However, other parts of the Jumaila are actively involved in fighting the IS.[21]

The biggest tribal confederation (*Qabila*) among the commanders is the Dulaim from Anbar, with 21 tribesmen from various tribes of the confederation. The biggest tribe in that confederation, in terms of number of commanders, is a relatively small tribe, Albu Bali from Ramadi.[22] In August 2016, the Iraqi army recaptured the al-Khalidiya region, between Rammadi and Falluja, and the fiercest fighting took place in the village of Albu Bali. Available information suggests that this area was the first one occupied by the IS and its predecessors in Anbar already in 2005.[23] In general, the Dulaim ceased many years ago to act as a united confederation; it is more correct to consider each of its tribe separately. Yet, the commanders from the Dulaim appear to be the exceptions in their tribes since most of the tribes in the confederation, including the Albu Bali, support the government.[24]

At the head of the list in Table 5 stands the Jabur confederation. The Jabur is one of Iraq's biggest tribes: the overall number of Jaburis in Iraq is between 4 and 8 millions. Like all the major Sunni tribes (Dulaim, 'Ubeid, Shammar, al-'Azza), this tribe is taking an active part in fighting the IS and paid a heavy price for it. Some of the territories of the Jabur were under IS control, including the tribal center of Sharqat and Qiyara, south of Mosul. Yet, with such a big tribe it is impossible to control all its members, and thus six Jaburis reached positions of authority in the IS. The most senior Jaburi is Abu Fatima al-Jaburi who succeeded Abu Muslim al-Turkmani as Baghdadi's deputy and governor of Iraq.[25] Having such a prominent Jaburi in the organization may have prompted others to join.[26] The same can be said about another major Sunni tribe, 'Ubeid. This tribe is more concentrated geographically than all the other tribes, living in the area of Hawija, west of Kirkuk and at the time of this writing still under IS control. It is said that this tribe, which experienced a massacre of demonstrators from the hands of the Iraqi Army in April 2013, was even closer to cooperation with the IS, but the IS rejected its advice to continue the attack south towards Baghdad in July-August 2014, and instead attacked the Kurds and assassinated prominent members of the 'Ubeid. Since then, there is a "blood" feud between this tribe and the IS and it is actively involved in fighting within the ranks of the tribal paramilitary units east of Mosul. The most senior 'Ubeidi was 'Aasi 'Ali al-'Ubeidi, IS commander in chief (*Ra'is Hay'at al-Arkan*) and second deputy of Baghdadi (killed in January 2016).[27]

By contrast, the Albu Badri - Baghdadi's tribe - has a modest share among the commanders and leaders. The Albu Badri is more like an extended family from Samaraa than a tribe. Compared with all the aforementioned tribes, the Albu Badri were not known as military officers or members of the security services. As "*Sada*" (claiming to be descendants of the Prophet), they were known for their religious standing and their high level of education.[28] This may explain their modest representation in the essentially military command of IS. However, it also shows that, unlike Saddam Hussein, Baghdadi is not trying to impose nepotism. Saddam Hussein's tribe, the Albu Nasir, and other tribes from Tikrit, are also under-represented in the IS command. It is claimed that after the occupation of Tikrit by the IS in June 2014, the Albu Nasir were the first local tribe to swear allegiance and 38 members of the tribe joined the IS.[29] However, for some unknown reasons, they never reached senior commanding positions. The most notorious member of Saddam's family to join the IS is Ayman Saba'awi Ibrahim al-Hasan, son of Saba'awi Ibrahim, Saddam's step brother and former head of the Mukhabarat.[30] When the government retook Tikrit in April 2015, those who had joined the IS faced calls for a social boycott by the local population, which may also explain the disenchantment of remaining in the IS.

That so many Iraqi IS commanders use their tribal surname is a sign of their boasting of their tribal affiliation rather than hiding it. The list of tribes represented in the IS command shows that the organization contain members of almost all of Iraq's major Sunni tribes, and as such is representative of the Sunni periphery. The fact that these tribes fight against the IS has not prevented members of the tribes from joining the IS, individually or in small groups. Significantly, tribal representation is diversified and no single tribe is predominant. This can explain the permission to use the tribal (and as we shall see later, also the regional) surnames.[31] Arguably, not relying on traditional social units, such as the tribe, the IS is a more "modern" organization than some of its rivals - namely the tribal militias, the Iraqi army, and the Kurdish Peshmerga.

Table 6: Regional Origins of Iraqi IS Commanders

West of Iraq (Anbar):	110
North of Iraq (Mosul, Kirkuk, Tel'afar):	113
Baghdad:	7
Center of Iraq (Samaraa, Tikrit, Diyala):	28
South:	13
Unknown:	74
Total:	345

Table 6 reveals that the overwhelming number of IS Iraqi commanders are from the province of Anbar and the Arab north of Iraq. This is not surprising since these areas are under IS control and border with Syria. These areas suffered from marginalization and discrimination in the allocation of funds from the Iraqi central government to Sunni areas. For years, their development lagged behind other regions in Iraq. Lacking oil, men from these regions used to serve in the army and the security services, and the local economy of the areas was totally dependent on funds from Baghdad. The province of Anbar, Iraq's largest in territorial terms, provides the highest number of commanders, despite being Iraq's smallest in terms of population. This province was the center stage of the "Iraqi Resistance" and saw the rise of the "Sahwa" - tribal militias. During the years of the Sunni revolt against the Americans (2003-2008), part of the tribes in this province were actively involved in the revolt and ensconced ISI, while other tribes (Albu Fahd, Albu Nimr, Albu Risha among others) initiated the formation of the "Sahwa" to combat the rebels. To a large extent, the province is still scarred by this divide. Many of the Anbaris who joined the IS were members of the security forces before 2003. By joining radical organizations, they were interested in perpetuating Sunni rule and regain their previous influence in post-2003 Iraq. None of them ever joined the U.S.-trained "Sahwas". In fact, the tribal alignment in Anbar today closely follows that which existed during the repression of the "Iraqi Resistance" and ISI in 2006 - 2007.[32] Therefore, the claim that the predominance of Anbaris in the IS has anything to do with the "abandonment" of the tribal militias by the U.S. is incorrect. Interestingly, the central part of Iraq is under-represented with the IS. The IS never held the provinces of Salah al-Din and Diyala, constituting the country's center, for a longer period, which reflects the lukewarm reception of the local population as well as

Table 7: Matching the Regional Origins with Locations of Service

Commanders (Governors, military commanders, civil administrators on a local level)NOT serving in their places of origin:	199
Commanders serving in their places of origin:	154
Unknown:	154
Total:	507

the prevalence of IS's rivals vying for the Sunni support. The rather marginal number of Baghdadis is another indication of the peripheral nature of the IS.[33]

The level of commanders and leadership examined in Table 7 forms the heart of the Islamic State. They are the administrators who connect the leadership to the population and form the military commanders protecting regions occupied by the IS. To a large extent, the legitimacy of the IS rests on their shoulders. It is therefore surprising to note that so many of these men serve away from their places of origin. These are not only Iraqis serving in other regions of Iraq, but frequently Arab militants serving away from their home countries. A military commander away from his place of origin will often face difficulties controlling his forces, while a civil administrator would not be able to win respect from the local population. Iraqi society is sensitive to the presence of strangers, even peasants from the nearby rural areas were considered strangers in some places[34] - let alone non-Iraqis. In extreme cases, the locals would revolt against the foreigners, challenging the entire IS apparatus. Thus, Sa'd al-'Ubeidi, the supreme commander of IS forces in Ramadi, who was hated by the locals for his violence, was not able to organize an effective local defense to prevent the reoccupation of Ramadi in December 2015.[35] In more extreme cases, the locals even assassinated the IS commander. This happened recently in Sharqat, south of Mosul.[36] It is possible that this alienation between IS cadres and the local population drives some of the commanders to use excessively repressive tactics.

Conclusions

The original aim of this research inventory was to refocus attention from some prominent figures in IS' command, who, due to being outstanding, receive excessive attention and create a distorted image of the IS command. The excessive focus on Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and even more so on Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, Abu Omar al-Shishani and the western mujahideen, like "Jihadi John" and 'Abd al Hamid Aba'ud, create an image of a fanatic and deeply ideological organization with a strong commitment to global Jihad, embracing warriors from all over the world. Based on an inventory of over 600 commanders at all levels, this research shows that the IS - at least in the core areas of Iraq and Syria - is essentially an Iraqi organization. Its senior command is almost entirely Iraqi.

The collective profile of the Iraqis in the IS shows that almost all are Sunni Arabs, with an impressive representation of the Sunni Turkmen minority. Many of the senior commanders were low- or mid-ranking officers in Saddam Hussein's security services, who joined the IS on Baghdadi's invitation and initiative, as late as 2010. They are not particularly religious. Many started attending mosques only in the 1990s when the state promoted more religiosity under the "faith campaign" (*al-Hamla al-Imaniya*). Their contribution to the IS in terms of military capacities, networking, governance, and repression was particularly valuable.

The commanders come from a large number of Sunni tribes, reflecting the diversified tribal map of Sunni Iraq. Yet the organization does not seem to be working with tribes regularly and in most cases tribesmen joined the IS individually, rather than as a group under orders from their sheikh. Baghdadi did not try to use his tribe to create a power basis, and unlike the Ba'athist security services, from which many of the senior cadres hailed, the IS organization is not nepotistic or monopolized by one tribe.

A significant number of Iraqi commanders hail from the province of Anbar in the west of Iraq and the provinces of the Arab north. Anbar was the cradle of the "Iraqi Resistance" in 2003-2008. Its repression by the U.S. and the U.S.-backed tribal militias in 2007 left the province deeply divided and this strife was exacerbated by the Sunni protests of 2013-2014. The city of Falluja in Anbar was the first Iraqi city to be occupied by IS in February 2014. Anbar and the Mosul area border on Syria and thus could benefit from the elimination of national but artificial borders. In comparison, the number of commanders from other Sunni areas is more modest.

At present (summer of 2017), the IS is losing ground in Iraq and Syria. In Mosul, IS men of both local and foreign origins, have been holding the local population in the old city as "human shields" and shoot those who try to escape. One of the reasons for the collapse of the IS is the fact that so many commanders and

administrators are posted away from their places of origin. If many in Mosul were happy to see the hated, non-local, mainly Shi'ia units of the Iraqi army leave the city in June 2014, they soon found that they were traded for Turkmen commanders of the IS or even worse, non-Iraqis, especially Libyans. The presence of non-Iraqi Arabs was immediately felt and often resented. There is an innate tension between the IS's modern aspects and some traditional features of Iraqi Sunni society. By not relying on a single tribe, the IS posed as a more "modern" organization than its rivals. Additionally, despite the predominance of Anbaris, the IS does not work along regional lines, avoiding giving preference to commanders from one region. The need to control populations efficiently and avoid the creation of regional power bases, inevitably led to tensions and undermined IS effort to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the local population.

The Iraqi "shadow men" at the center of this inventory of commanders are the backbone of the IS. They are sustaining, within the organization, what Charles Tripp termed "the shadow state" in Iraq.[37] The essence of their activity is to maintain power in the hands of veterans of the security services by the use of repression and terror. Although many of the commanders on which this study was based have in the meantime been killed, other Iraqis form the most coherent group to head the IS, at least in Iraq, after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's presumed death. To a large extent, the future of the IS lies in their hands.

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Notes

[1] See, for example, Craig Whiteside, "A Pedigree of Terror: The Myth of the Baathist Influence in the IS Movement", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.11, issue 3 (June 2017) which focuses almost exclusively on the 2006 - 2010 period and discusses only prominent leaders.

[2] See for example: Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: Stories of the Mujahideen: Unseen Islamic State Biographies of Outstanding Members"; URL: http://www.rubincenter.org/2016/08/the-archivist-stories-of-the-mujahideen-unseen-islamic-state-biographies-of-outstanding-members/?utm_source=activetrail&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=%20Rubin%20Newsletter%2C%20August%2025%2C%202016; accessed 25 August 2016.

[3] Saudis usually use the surnames "Qahtani" or "Jazrawi", possibly because of the sensitivity of the surname "Sa'udi" - but not in all cases.

[4] For the famous tree of IS senior commanders see: Hisham al-Hashimi, "Revealed: The Islamic State "cabinet" from Finance Minister to Suicide Bomb deployer"; *Telegraph*, 9 July 2014; URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10956193/Revealed-the-Islamic-State-cabinet-from-finance-minister-to-suicide-bomb-deployer.html> accessed 29.2.2016. This list is already dated.

[5] Conversation with Aymenn al-Tamimi, Haifa 22 February 2016.

[6] See the "Sinjar Files" captured by the U.S. Army in Sinjar, 2007. Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, "Al Qaida's foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Files," *Combating Terrorism Center*, West Point, 2007. p.8; accessed 1 March 2016

[7] Only eight commanders, out of the total number, had Western citizenship: mostly were of French or Algerian origins. The most senior was Abu Bakr Bin Habib al-Hakim, a French of Algerian origin, who was military commander of the al-Raqqa region and was reportedly killed in a Coalition airstrike. *Al-Mada* 16 April 2017. One was a Qadhi with French citizenship in the province of Nainawa; he was reportedly killed (*Azzaman*, 24 March 2016). The other was Abu Ibrahim al-Baljiki (a Belgian), in charge of recruitment in Europe, who was reportedly killed in Mosul (*Al-Mada*, 6 June 2016). Another was a French man of Algerian origins, who was Sharia instructor of one of the IS brigades; he was killed in Mosul. (Hisham al-Hashimi's Facebook site, 11 February 2017). Another was "Abu Omar al-Hollandi", a Dutch convert, who was in charge of the foreign fighters in Mosul and was reportedly killed there (*Azzaman*, 13 January 2017). Another was Rasheed Qasim, a French of Algerian origins, who was a Sharia instructor in a military unit in Mosul and was reportedly killed there.

[8] Zahid al-Bayati, "Turkmen: The Third Largest Ethnic Group in Iraq", in: Sa'ad Saloum (Ed.), *Minorities in Iraq* (Arabic and English), Baghdad: Masarat, 2013. p. 145. Their numbers are estimated at less than 1 percent of the population.

[9] The most senior Turkmen was Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, al-Baghdadi's deputy; he was killed by a U.S. air strike in August 2015. Turkmani was a middle-rank officer of Saddam's Mukhabarat; his real name was Fadil al-Hayali (*Haaretz*, 24 August 2015; *Azzaman*, 22 July 2015; *Almada*, 13 December 2015). He was replaced by another Turkmen, Abu 'Alaa al-'Afari, whose real name was 'Abd al-Rahman al-Qaduli, a long time Jihadi with experience acquired in Afghanistan and a previous teacher, killed in March 2016 by a U.S. airstrike in Syria (Albashir 'abd al rahman, "Man Huwa 'Abd al-Rahman al-Qaduli" *Al-Ray al-Yawm*, 25 March 2016); URL: <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=412383>. Other prominent Turkmen are Hamad Za'an al-'Afari, the Minister of Finance, reportedly killed in Mosul, Khalid al-'Afari, the Minister of Education and Abu 'Abd al-Majid al-'Afari, the Governor (Wali) of Nainawa (Mosul province)(*Azzaman*, 25 June 2015; *Niqash* 11 September 2014; *Azzaman*, 29 August 2015).

[10] The IS hardly provides biographical data on its members. The Ba'athist past of many of them is a source of embarrassment for the organization and in the rare cases of IS obituaries, it is totally ignored. See the obituary for Abu Nabil al-Anbari in Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Eulogy to Abu Nabil al-Anbari: Islamic State Leader in Libya" (*MERIA, Rubin Center*, 7 January 2016; URL: <http://www.rubincenter.org/2016/01/eulogy-to-abu-nabil-al-anbari-islamic-state-leader-in->

libya/?utm_source=activetrail&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Rubin%20newsletter,%20Jan.%202013,%202016). The only sources for biographic information on the occupations of IS Iraqi commanders before 2003 is the Iraqi press or informed observers, such as Hisham al-Hashimi. We know more about prominent commanders than about the others

[11] This is from a U.S. military study of imprisoned insurgent suspects. Jeffrey Azarva, "Is U.S Detention Policy in Iraq Working", *Middle East Quarterly*, 16, (2009), pp. 5 - 14.

[12] For example see: *Azzaman*, 9 January 2016 on 'Aasi 'Ali al-'Ubeidi and Aymenn al-Tamimi on Abu Nabil al-Anbari, Al-Tamimi, "Eulogy".

[13] This document was translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "An Account of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Islamic State Succession Lines" (*GLORIA, Rubin Center*, 25 January 2016; URL:

http://www.rubincenter.org/2016/01/an-account-of-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-islamic-state-succession-lines/?utm_source=activetrail&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Rubin%20Newsletter,%20February%201,%202016.

[14] On the biography of Baghdadi see: William McCants, "The Believer" Brookings Institute, 1 September 2015; URL: http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2015/thebeliever?utm_campaign=brookings-essay&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=21719798&hsenc=p2ANqtz-9153QtBn--u2iT-e9ObiKCAy18EnQySEs83Lc8WjT_bF33nTnkTPJQtaAr80Bu3g0o1p20iWJ33kv8rZTZLepaGaM95w&_hsmi=21719798.

[15] Ibid.

[16] I agree with Craig Whiteside (see note 1) that the IS should by no means be branded a "Ba'athi or ex-Ba'athi organization" as far as its *ideological* facet is concerned. The members of the security forces of the previous regime have never been hard-core Ba'athist even before 2003 and their loyalty to Saddam was also doubtful, both before and after 2003. Saddam Hussein is not the "godfather" of the IS. Yet the sheer number of previous regime elements in IS' ranks is staggering. We know too little about the inside circles of IS leadership to be able to conclude, as Whiteside did, that it was always the Salafis who commanded the officers. A different approach in which the IS organization is divided into a religious branch and a military branch, like, for example, Hamas, is more plausible.

[17] The highest-ranking officer who joined ISI was Abu Bakr al-Anbari, a lieutenant general (*Liwa*) in Saddam's army. There were hundreds of similar ranking officers in Saddam's army

[18] *Azzaman*, 15 July 2015. His father , Shaykh Mishhin, later ostracized him for his act (*Al Mada* 29 May 2016; URL: <http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/news/510952%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%88%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%88>.

In June 2016, following the taking of Falluja, Rafi' was apprehended by the Iraqi forces; URL: <http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/ViewPrintedIssue.aspx?PageID=20284&IssueID=2069>).

[19] *Al Mada*, 29 November 2015.

[20] For more on the Jumaila, see: Khashi' al-Ma'adidi, *Aali al-Rafidain* (The Nobles of Mesopotamia), Baghdad: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiya al-'amma, 1990.Vol.3. pp. 309 - 316.

[21] For example, Col. Juma'a Faza' al-Jumaili, commander of a brigade of the, predominantly Shiite, "*Hashd al-Sha'bi*" in the Karma front, near Falluja: the tribal domain of the Jumaila (*Al Mada*, 1 March 2016).

[22] According to Ma'adidi, it is a sub-tribe of the Albu 'Ubaid of the Dulaim confederation.- Ma'adidi, op. cit., p. 67. In this tribe, mobilization appears to be based on tribal and family connections. See the case of Mahir al-Bilawi, the military commander of Falluja, killed in May 2016. He was connected to another senior commander from his tribe, Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi. Four of his brothers are also Dawa'ish and even his father is the head of the IS Shar'ia courts in Anbar (*Al Mada*, 29 May 2016) ; URL: <http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/news/510884/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AD>, accessed 29 May 2016).

[23] URL: <http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/news/516057/%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%84%D9%82-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1>

Words of the Shaikh of the Albu Fahd in that report suggest that IS presence in that area may also be connected to tribal conflicts between the pro-government Albu Fahd and the Albu Bali and Albu Kan'an.

[24] *Al Mada* 29 November 2015. According to this source, the only tribes of the Dulaim which are "neutral" are the Albu 'Assaf and Albu Mar'i.

[25] Al-Tamimi, "An Account"; URL: http://www.rubincenter.org/2016/01/an-account-of-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-islamic-state-succession-lines/?utm_source=activetrail&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Rubin%20Newsletter,%20February%201,%202016.

[26] A recent release of IS forms from Mosul and its periphery shows that a large number of Jaburis served in the IS police force. The Jaburis outnumber any other tribe in the lists, showing that they were even more strongly represented among ordinary IS policemen. Significantly, these forms were taken from areas in which the Jaburis are native; URL: https://twitter.com/iraqi_day/status/878585847896997889?s=03 (accessed 26 June 2017). I am grateful for Adam Hoffman for pointing out to me this link.

[27] *Azzaman*, 9 January 2016; *Al Mada* 12 January 2016.

[28] Thus, the head of the tribe in the 1990s, Dr. 'Abd al-Latif al-Badri was a surgeon. *Al Jumhuriyya*, 22 March 1993.

[29] URL: www.Niqash.org, 22 October 2015.

[30] *Al Mada*, 13 December 2015. Saba'awi was executed by the government.

[31] It brings to mind the famous ban on the use of surnames introduced by the Baa'th party in 1976 to mask the predominance of Tikritis.

[32] See *Al Mada*, 29 November 2015.

[33] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was born and raised in Samaraa. He adopted the surname Baghdadi because he moved with his family to Baghdad and studied there. In this article, he is, however, counted as a Samarai.

[34] Aymenn al-Tamimi visited Mosul on March-April 2017 and quoted a relative who claimed that most members of the IS in Mosul were from nearby rural areas and that this often created friction. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Journeys to Mosul"; URL: [http://www.rubincenter.org/2017/06/journeys-to-mosul/?utm_source=activetrail&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=MERIA,%20v20n3%20\(Winter%202016\),%20complete](http://www.rubincenter.org/2017/06/journeys-to-mosul/?utm_source=activetrail&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=MERIA,%20v20n3%20(Winter%202016),%20complete); accessed 26 June.

[35] *Al Mada*, 7 January 2016.

[36] *Azzaman*, 27 February 2016, *Al Mada*, 28 February, 2016.

[37] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*. Cambridge: CUP, 2010 (3rd edition), pp.259 - 267.