



A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA (ISIS)'S ORIGIN, GOALS, AND ITS FALL THROUGH THE US AND ALLIED FORCES

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ABSTRACT: *The origins of ISIS were traced to the Arab Spring that created instability in the Middle East. This instability was exacerbated by the American-led coalition's invasion of Iraq in 2003, prompted by the 9/11 attacks. The paper aims to have an overview of the origin and goals of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the strategies employed by the U.S. and Allied Forces to make ISIS fall. A systematic literature review approach was adopted to review the selected literature. ISIS was formed out of various militant groups in the country whose goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate governed by strict Sharia law. The goal of ISIS was to establish an Islamic caliphate in Iraq, Syria, and beyond with a caliph as the leader of the territories, thereby eradicating state borders and governments they deemed to be illegitimate. This caliphate is to be governed by strict Sharia law. This analysis delves into the strategies used by the US-led coalition to reclaim territories from ISIS. These strategies include military strategies, economic strategies, political strategies, and social strategies. It was, therefore, recommended that to combat ISIS's ideology effectively, the United States may need to collaborate more with Muslim clerics all over the world to promote interpretations of the Quran that counter radicalization in Islam.*

KEYWORDS: Al-Qaeda, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), Islamic caliphate, Sharia law, the US and Allied Forces.



INTRODUCTION

The ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) emerged as a radical Sunni jihadist group in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies. The removal of Saddam Hussein created a power vacuum that propelled Iraq into a state of violence, with various Islamic groups vying for power. Among them was a group led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who founded Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in 1999, later aligning with Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda in 2004 which later became ISIS. This marked the beginning of a wave of terrorism in Iraq. Following al-Zarqawi's death, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assumed leadership and rebranded the group as ISI (Islamic State of Iraq) in 2010. The United States' War on Terror was triggered by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, prompting significant investments of time and resources to combat terrorism, along with foreign policy shifts.

To analyze the strategy employed by the United States and its allies in defeating ISIS, it is essential to examine the multifaceted approach adopted, including military force, diplomatic initiatives, and socio-economic measures. Additionally, a critical evaluation of ISIS's goals, which include territorial expansion, instilling fear, and establishing political dominance, will provide insight into the complexities of countering this transnational terrorist threat.

America's Reason for Attacking Iraq

The United States' accusation of Iraq's possession of nuclear weapons, links to terrorism, and accusation of the president's link to the terrorist attack in the United States as expressed by the United States were the reasons why the United States went on with the war in Iraq with it collision force of Australia, Great Britain, Poland, Netherlands, and Denmark. All these accusations were critically debunked by many scholars (Isakhan, 2015), on the inability of the United States and its allies to find any traces of nuclear weapons in Iraq which invalidates the invasion of Iraq. And by going to war with Iraq, it has led to the breakdown of law and order (Hazbun, 2015). This act by the United States and its allies gave the groundwork for the formation of ISIS.

Rojas (2011) argues that the invasion was economically motivated unlike other narratives, which was to transform the Iraqi economy along genuine free-market principles, which included extensive privatization of the oil industry and other state-owned assets that will benefit the United States in terms of oil. This argument was also supported by Pelletière (2004) who agreed on the fact that the control of oil in that region was the main reason why the United States went to war against Iraq.

Origin of ISIS

Historically, the terrorist group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) came to light as a radical Sunni jihadist group notably after the Arab Spring which was a total revolt across the Arab world (Mabon & Royle, 2016) creating the bedrock for various jihadist groups in the middle east. The jihadist group called ama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad was created in 1991 by a man called Abu Musabn Al-Zarquwi who allied himself with Al Qaeda in 2004. The invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies in 2003 (Rogers, 2006), formally created the start for the formation of ISIS. The war saw the fall of Baghdad just 21 days after the war due to the shared power of the United States which led President Bush to declare his victory speech on the USS Abraham Lincoln ship (Mabon & Royle, 2016).



The invasion was not without causality, according to the Iraqi body count which gave details of about 186,901-210,296 total civilian deaths from the start of the war in Iraq. The invasion forces also suffered losses which added up to 1500 US troops killed and over 11,500 injured during the war (Rogers, 2006). This has shown that the invasion was not as easy as it has been claimed, rather the coalition forces faced serious casualties in the battle of Iraq. This victory saw the dissolving of the state security system which included the military and other state security services majorly towards Sunni Muslims. De-baathification of Iraq was a major cause of ISIL in Iraq as Shia Muslims came to dominate politically (Mabon & Royle, 2016). Cook (2017) also argues that de-baathification which was the marginalization of Sunnis was a major factor contributing to the emergence of ISIS following the dismissal of the whole Iraq state security forces and civil servants of mostly Sunnis and the banning from future employment which created economic hardship for Sunni Muslims in Iraq, and political exclusion in Iraq.

The disenfranchisement of Sunni Muslims sparked a significant revolt against the political and economic structures in Iraq, creating an environment conducive to the rise of Sunni extremists to challenge the government. This instability allowed groups like ISIS to gain support, particularly among those lacking basic needs, further exacerbating the turmoil in the country (Mabon & Royle, 2016). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the new leader and rebranded the name into ISI (Islamic State of Iraq) at first in 2010 (Isakhan, 2015) which became ISIS seeing the extension of territories into Syria.

The order issued by the CPA for the De-baathification government was heavily criticized because not all Iraqis believed in the Baathist regime. Due to the style of government of Saddam Hussein, people were forced to adhere to the baathist doctrine if they wanted to hold any significant position in Iraq. So, the blanket dismissal of citizens was condemned, making the US responsible for ISIS formation (Al-Ali, 2014).

ISIS Goals

The goal of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) was to see to the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Iraq, Syria, and beyond with a caliph as the leader of the territories, eradicating state borders and government they deem to be illegitimate, governed by strict Sharia law (Cook, 2017) which extends into everyday life including dressing regulating speech and movement of people. This strict adherence was one of the reasons why foreign fighters joined ISIS seeing punishment including torture and sometimes death sentences for anyone who breaks the law in ISIS-held territories in Iraq and Syria. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), 165 executions have been carried out under 14 ISIS established courts; this was through either firing squad or public execution (AL JAZEERA, 2015).

This helps in extending its ideology through violence and intimidation. This objective was to be achieved through the conquest of territories in both Iraq and Syria with the prospect of further territories in other countries, starting with the seizure of areas in Iraq such as Fallujah in the Amber Province, Tal Afar, and Mosul in the northern regions and then rapidly advancing southward towards Tikrit (Mabon & Royle, 2016).



Strategies Employed by U.S and Allies

The United States and its allies made use of various strategies in fighting ISIS. These strategies include military, economic, political, and social strategies. These strategies have been shown to bring down ISIS's expansionist goal in the Middle East.

Military Strategies

With respect to military strategies, there was the formation of an alliance that initially consisted of states like the United Kingdom, Australia, and Poland. In time, more countries joined this coalition all of which had the same goal, which was to see to the defeat and influence of ISIS in Iraq which must be stopped (Isakhan, 2015). The coalition was quickly formed because of the quick spread and expansion of ISIS across Iraq and Syria in 2014 which saw the taking over of territories in the states, forming an Islamic caliphate that was to be ruled with Sharia Law. This coalition's main goal and objective was to destroy the organization and infrastructure of ISIS in Iraq.

The United States was the head of this coalition and was the country that contributed most to this project. This coalition was to conduct military operations in Iraq, and part of this military operation was the use of Air strikes. Airstrikes were a very effective strategy that was used to destroy structures and the establishment of these terrorist groups and this led to the death of many top-ranking ISIS officials both in Iraq and Syria. The use of unmanned aerial vehicles which can be called drones was also used in warfare as this aided the surveillance and assassinating of key ISIS generals. This tactic has resulted in more than 3700 strikes in Syria since August 8th, 2014 costing the United States millions of taxpayers' dollars in the war against terrorism (Munardi, 2016). Scholars have argued that the use of this tactic is terrorist in nature because it also led to the death of innocent civilians in an attempt to take out an important ISIS commander in Iraq and Syria (Sheehan et al., 2021).

In addition, the coalition as part of their military strategy used the local forces in fighting this terrorist group; this was done by training and equipping state-owned forces and vetted militias to fight against ISIS to retake lost territories in Iraq (Munardi, 2016). This saw to the transfer of weapons and military training by the United States and its allies which proved to be a game changer in the fight against terrorism, because the United States was aware of the advantage the Iraqi forces and Kurdish forces had due to the territorial landscape of their countries thereby giving them better victory rates in reconquering lost territories and with this strategy, ISIS has a caliphate started to lose influence. For example, Mosul was one of ISIS's biggest achievements in the quest to create a state. Mosul was the headquarters of ISIS state which was the largest Islamic state controlled by ISIS which saw the inhumane treatment of people in this area, for example, businesses located in Mosul were levied heavily and citizens were forced to pay several taxes which led to poor living conditions (Stergiou, 2016).

The battle for Mosul was fought by the Kurdish and the Iraqi military which the Americas supported in terms of intelligence sharing and air power (Munardi, 2016). The United States with the support of Iraqi forces led an assault on the compound of the ISIS leader resulting in the death of Abubakar al Baghdadi and this was a big blow to the Islamist state (Oztig, 2021). The Iraqi forces were able to retake various territories during these campaigns Examples of these territories include the Mosul Dam, Haditha Dam, Fallujah, and Ramadi. The taking back of this territory showed the willingness of the Iraqi forces to fight against this extremist Sunni



group and the willingness to retake territories back from ISIS. With these various military oppressions by mid-2017, the Islamic State was heading toward its fall coupled with the fact that foreign fighters were reluctant to travel to fight for the caliphate which also led to the inability of ISIS to reclaim lost territories in Iraq which gave the Iraqi states the ability to control the recovered territories with the help of the coalition forces.

In addition, this strategy also came with a high number of deaths in Iraq which according to the Warton Institutes of International Affairs estimated some 315 thousand civilians from direct war in Iraq and this number continues to rise. Combatants were not excluded in this report, according to Statista which gave a total of 4,491 American soldiers killed in Iraq from 2003-2011. This report shows the cost of war incurred by the United States in Iraq to restore peace and democracy which turned out to be a failure resulting in a breakdown in the Middle East.

Oztig (2021) argued that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq due to the invasion of the United States and its allies paved the way for the influence of Iran in the country. However, this notion was also supported by Rojas (2011) who argues that the United States' aims in coming to the war were not achieved, because as the Iraq government took its shape in the late 2000s, this saw the political class which was largely Shias see to the political shift from the United States to Iran because of their shared history as Shia Muslim. This is the opposite of what the United States wanted, which was to reduce the influence of Iran in the region. This gave Iran the ability to help Iraq in terms of arming the Kurdish group to fight against ISIS and also providing economic, political, and humanitarian help to Iraq (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015).

Economic Strategies

Turning now to the economic strategy employed by the United States-led coalition, the United States-led alliance did not only come with military campaigns but also an economic strategy geared to weaken the Islamic states' finances. ISIS at this time was considered to be one of the richest terrorist groups because of its ability to raise and fund itself without any external help unlike its counterparts al Qaida.

Oil was one of the biggest means of revenue for the Islamic states which involved the extracting and selling of refined oil which were produced in small mobile refineries (Stergiou, 2016). This oil was being sold and smuggled into different countries, and by doing this, the Islamic state was able to get enough money to sponsor itself, pay its fighters and also purchase weapons through the black market. The United States' strategy to limit the amount of money coming in through this sector was to conduct an air assault on these mobile refineries, and oil fields, thereby disrupting the finances of the group (Le Billon, 2021), in which 16 oil-related structures were destroyed by the end of 2014 thereby destroying their establishment (Stergiou, 2016). Also, the United States went into cooperation with countries like Turkey and the Kurdistan regional government of northern Iraq to prevent the smuggling of oil that must have originated from ISIS territories (Tierney, 2017). Also, the United States-led coalition identified brokers responsible for buying these oils thereby deterring these buyers from purchasing oil from that region. This strategy enables the United States to reduce the inflow of funds into ISIS (Kancherla, 2020).



Kidnapping was another means that ISIS used to generate and sustain itself, as of 2014 ISIS has gotten over 35-45 million dollars from ransom payments (Kancherla, 2020). The Islamic State resorted to the kidnapping of foreign nationals and local citizens to pressure their governments or loved ones into paying huge sums of money to see to the release of their loved ones. The United States as a country did not and will not negotiate with terrorists which was the strategy that government administrations in the United States upheld to deter the terrorist groups from kidnapping for the sake of ransom and this led to the killing of American citizens in the hands of ISIS fighters (Kancherla, 2020). The United States has advocated for global collaboration and coordination in addressing and confronting terrorism in all its manifestations. The US government has offered resources and assistance for training, exercises, and operations aimed at apprehending terrorist suspects and ensuring they are brought to justice, while also preventing the group from taking any more territories in Iraq refuge (Munardi, 2016). This international cooperation has necessitated extensive diplomatic efforts, fostering close bilateral and multilateral relationships among law enforcement agencies, intelligence services, and nations' foreign ministries. The United States coalition also resorted to tackling the major reason for the creation of these terrorist groups by advocating for an all-inclusive government in Iraq, the coalition also provided various economic aid to Iraq citizens to reduce the poverty rate in the country thereby giving people no reason to join ISIS.

The United States has supported all peace-loving nations in their efforts to combat this terrorist group. Given the widespread reach of terrorism, there has been a global consensus on the need to combat it with maximum force and unified action.

Political Strategies

According to the United States Department which designated ISIS a terrorist group in 2014, the country (USA) securitized the organization which means war can be fought against ISIS and any country or individuals that share in its ideology. This also was followed by allies of the United States all around the world. Additionally, the US has pursued policies of cooperation with willing and capable states, providing assistance to those in need, exerting pressure on reluctant states, and even employing coercion against uncooperative states in the fight against global terrorism. This approach can be termed as coercive diplomacy (Munardi, 2016).

There was the use of coercive diplomacy involving economic sanctions against states supporting, hiding, or unsupportive states in the fight against terrorism (Munardi, 2016). Economic sanctions can be towards restricting the importation and exportation of goods and services from this state. Examples are Iran, Syria, and Afghanistan. This strategy was to improve the finances of these countries.

These sanctions were not only targeted to countries but also to individuals who are known to sponsor terrorism either directly or indirectly. Financial institutions in Iraq and Syria were known to be used by ISIS to transfer money around the world and also to receive funds from various sources, these sanctions imposed by the United States coalition led to the cutting off relations of banks outside these territories with banks located in ISIS territories which latter led to the weakening of ISIS finance (Freeman & Ruehsen, n.d.).



Social Strategies

ISIS and other international terrorist groups utilize the internet to spread various extremist ideologies and recruit individuals, particularly through popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Effective counterterrorism strategies must acknowledge how these organizations exploit the internet to target vulnerable individuals, including young people susceptible to radicalization and those seeking a sense of responsibility for something higher than themselves (Greenberg, 2016).

This social media platform was used because it was what has been used by youth always, which allowed terrorist groups like ISIS an easy way to spread their false extremist ideology to young and vulnerable children of the world. The group's communication strategy is designed to convince Muslims that it is their religious obligation to fight for the restoration of a caliphate. Its narrative portrays ISIS as a force for change, representing true faith, advocating for its distorted version of social justice, and seeking vengeance for perceived injustices, especially in the Western world. This ISIS strategy was used to call for foreign fighters and to spread fear to the public by showing videos and pictures of their terrorist act against people in the name of Islam (Farwell, 2014).

In talking about social media influences, Windsor (2018) argues that it is not only men who are at risk of getting radicalized, women have been seen to get radicalized in various countries because of the internet. This radicalization can come because of social circumstances. In the absence of viable avenues for education, employment, and societal integration, women may find themselves susceptible to involvement in illicit or undesirable activities.

The United States and its allies' strategy was to go into alliance with these social media giants to encourage them to act faster and block any account that was seen to be that of ISIS spreading this radical information. The social media company also went as far as identifying various individuals who may have been radicalized due to ISIS propaganda and also blocking their accounts in the process. The writing of algorithms that will automatically track and block any accounts or websites through these social media companies was taken down. This strategy was used by the supervision of the United States of America to attack this ideological colonization that was done by ISIS quickly before it spread all over the Internet. Between the years 2014 to 2016, social media companies especially Twitter announced that they took down hundreds of thousands of accounts linked to ISIS and other terrorist groups (Greenberg, 2016).

This campaign brought the recruitment process downhill because people were aware of the life they could have if they were to go to fight for ISIS (Greenberg, 2016). This strategy by the United States-led alliances was not successful in stopping online recruitment but it was able to reduce the radicalization and recruitment on social media. The banning and removal of accounts belonging to ISIS groups were just recreated on these platforms by re-opening another account. Soon after, recruitment was taken to the dark web to bypass regulations by social media companies (Greenberg, 2016).



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The origins of ISIS can be traced back to the Arab Spring, which created instability in the Middle East. This instability was exacerbated by the American-led coalition's invasion of Iraq in 2003, prompted by the 9/11 attacks. ISIS was formed out of various militant groups in the country whose goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate governed by strict Sharia law. Strategies used by the US-led coalition included military engagement which included the usage of drones, and supporting local forces to reclaim territory from ISIS. Diplomatic efforts rallied countries worldwide against ISIS, Additionally, economic sanctions were imposed on countries supporting ISIS, and social media platforms were targeted to disrupt recruitment and radicalization efforts. These strategies were successful in dismantling ISIS's goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria. However, ISIS's ideology remains active and continues to pose a threat, as evidenced by recent attacks in Russia, which ISIS claimed responsibility for. To combat ISIS's ideology effectively, the United States may need to collaborate more with Muslim clerics all over the world to promote interpretations of the Quran that counter radicalization in Islam. By engaging in such efforts, ideological radicalization by ISIS and other Islamic terrorist groups could be addressed more effectively.

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