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**Research Thesis Title:**

**Analysis and Assessment of Islamic State's military strategy in Iraq**

**(2011-2015)**

Submitted by Mehdi Laghmari to the University of Exeter  
as a thesis for the degree of  
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## **ABSTRACT**

*Because many militant groups from the Islamist political landscape and beyond have suffered extinction, survival of insurgent groups in a context of insecurity and rivalry is not a fact. In 2010, the Islamic State in Iraq was near extinction and considered as defeated by a myriad of enemies regrouping 400 000 fighters (the US and Iraqi forces and militias). Four years later, it was able to control a significant part of the Iraqi and Syrian soil, outperform all Islamist groups in history, proclaim a caliphate and export its model, which will have long-lasting consequences at regional and international levels. This thesis seeks to explain the group's resurgence from 2011 to 2015 by adopting a provincial perspective and with the theoretical framework of the indirect approach. By introducing a categorisation of operations based on their confrontational nature, this investigation tries to understand IS' military effort in Iraq from a quantitative and qualitative perspective. In addition, a study of its relations with challenging social structures (tribes and insurgent groups) and an analysis of the group's propaganda frames give us the possibility to determine how the group introduced more flexibility in its overall strategy and articulated a particular discourse in order to attract deprived Sunni Iraqis during the 2012 Iraqi protests. The main contribution of using this model is to explain IS' past resurgence and enrich the existing literature with a complementary explanation of the group tactics and rapid morphing from a guerrilla to conventional warfare. This research project possesses the following creative elements: it provides a detailed and in-depth account of Islamic State's strategy, applies theoretical frameworks from security studies to it and offers a better understanding of the group's political behaviour by analysing its interactions with a range of actors ranging from its social incubator to competitive social structures and ideological rivals. It aims to expand on the idea of the Islamic State as an insurgent group that has adopted a repertoire of different strategies to establish an expansive caliphate by closely examining its adoption of the indirect approach and its execution at the operational levels of war.*

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## **List of acronyms and abbreviations for the group.**

**AQ: Al-Qaeda**

**AQI: Tanzim Al Qaeda fi Bilad Al Rafidayn Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. Al Qaeda in Iraq in English**

**TWJ: Jama'at al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad (Group of Monotheism and Jihad)**

**IS: Islamic State**

**ISI: Islamic State in Iraq**

**ISIS: Islamic State Iraq and Sham**

**JN: Jabhat Al Nusra**

**LH: Liddle Hart**

Regarding the use of the name for the group throughout this study I will use the group's name used in a given period. To avoid confusion and anachronism and because there are several names for the organisation, I will stick to the group's nomenclature at each stage of its chronology, except for the ISIS and IS period, where I use indistinctively the same acronym IS. Following most of the studies on the Islamic State's history, I follow a longitudinal approach of the group's history since 2003 that transcends organisational markers and name changes.

Timeline of Islamic State's nomenclature evolution:

TWJ: *Tawheed wal-Jihad* 2003-2004

AQI: *Al Qaeda in Iraq* 2004-2005

MSM: *Majliss Shura Al-Mujahedeen* 2006

ISI: *Islamic State in Iraq* October 2006- mid2013

ISIS: *Islamic State in Iraq and Sham* 2013-2014

IS: *the Islamic State* 2014 – onward



# I – Introduction

“*Baqiya!*” (Remaining), “*Dawlat Islam Baqiya!*” (The Islamic State remaining). For more than a decade, these two expressions have represented the rallying cry of thousands of Islamic State (IS) members and supporters all around the world. Both have been used by its leaders during their discourses, by its fighters after a pledge of allegiance, by its online supporters in social media and even by prisoners forced to voice them as a symbol of humiliation before their execution. They represent the group’s state of mind, which has elevated its survival as a sign of victory after having been cornered many times by a countless number of enemies worldwide. In its 15 years of existence since 2003, the group has shown a strong capacity of resilience, which has made the concept itself a focal point of its ideology. The slogan took roots in a context when the group was pressured by tribal reversal before being ultimately expelled from Iraqi cities. This means that whatever happens, the group will survive and remain. As Romain Caillet<sup>1</sup> records, this term was first used in an official media statement in 2007 by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, (the first leader of the IS in Iraq) with an occurrence of 11 times. From that moment, when IS members and sympathisers were shouting this slogan they were claiming the group’s objective, which was completed after the expansion of 2013-2014 in Iraq and Syria by adding “*wa tatamadad*”, which means, “and expand”. Shouting “Baqiya” for the group’s members is a way of challenging the rest of the world by stressing its ability to survive, resurge and maintain its ideological appeal, for the higher purpose of creating a transnational Islamic State. Indeed, its initial political agenda was ambitious and considered as unrealistic. Starting with a handful of foreign fighters around the figure of Abu Mosab al-Zarqawi, it grew by attracting local hosts, dominating the Iraqi insurgency and ultimately creating a borderless Islamic state. Between 2003 and 2010, 175 000 US troops supported by 100 000 Sunni tribal fighters and 300 000 Iraqi security forces were necessary to defeat a group

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<sup>1</sup> Romain Caillet , « Analyse: pour comprendre le slogan de l’État islamique – « baqiya » », 12<sup>th</sup> Octobre 2014, <http://www.religion.info/2014/10/12/pour-comprendre-slogan-etat-islamique-baqiya/>

composed of roughly 5000 members. In 2010, ISI was on the verge of extinction; 80 % of its leaders had been killed or jailed<sup>2</sup>, thousands of its members had been neutralised, and their political goal of creating an Islamic Sunni state in Iraq was considered as having failed.

### 1-Academic debates on IS

The academic discussion related to “Islamic State” organisation takes its root in the debate on Political Islam movements in general. The 1980s “orientalist/essentialist” clash evolved until nowadays ongoing debates about the group’s nature. When studying Islam and the Muslim world and understanding how and where it intersects with global politics, two opposed schools of thought have emerged to explain it: the “Essentialists” and the “Contextualists”. The most famous defender of the contextualist approach is Edward Said with his work “Orientalism”. He defended the idea that culture and power are closely related in the historical establishment of particular forms of world order. His work is considered as a rejection of Bernard Lewis’ article “the roots of Muslim rage”<sup>3</sup>, where he defends that Islam is itself the cause of anti-Western violence because of its non-compatibility with modernity. Muslims are connoted as exotic, lazy or violent as opposed to the rational westerner. Said argues that this subjective bias is part of the colonial legacy which he termed as “Orientalism”.<sup>4</sup> For Reza Pankhurst, the main criticism directed at both essentialist and contextualist sides is the “reduction of Muslim societies to their simplest traits”<sup>5</sup>. The essentialists’ reading of Islam generally explains the rise of political Islam due to the inherent incompatibility of Islam with modernity and all its values, while the second

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<sup>2</sup>“U.S. Says 80% of al Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Removed”, 4/06/2010, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10243585>

<sup>3</sup>Bernard Lewis, “the roots of Muslim Anger”, The Atlantic, 1990  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/issues/90sep/rage.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*, Penguin Books March 29, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Reza Pankhurst, *The Inevitable Caliphate?*, Hurst Company London, 2013, p 26

approach shed light on the failure of the societal problems of poverty and denial of political representation. Orientalists view the embracing of democracy by Islamists as solely utilitarian while the others see the use of Islamic tradition in the political arena as a call for participation and better governance. Contextualists consider that essentialists have detached Islam from the socio-cultural specificities of Muslim societies that put the revealed text into practice. Besides their differences, as recalled by Pankhurst, both approaches share the idea of “liberal democracy as their ultimate reference point in their approach and analysis implicitly”<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, as noted by Michael Salla, the relation between liberal democracy and political Islam is unidirectional: “political Islam either responds to liberal democratic norms by demonstrating their consistency with the Islamic heritage or reacts to them as contrary to the Islamic heritage”.<sup>7</sup>

The rise of IS in 2014 and the subsequent terrorist wave of attacks hitting the world reopened a heated debate among scholars and experts in how to consider a group such as the IS, regarding its origins as well as its inspirations. In a debate echoing the rift between the “essentialists” and “contextualists” of the ’80s, different perspectives are facing each other. One group labelled as “Jihadologist” consider IS as a rational actor and is represented by academics such as Aaron Zellin, and Thomas Hegghammer and Romain Caillet in France. They consider jihadism as an ideology and its militants as rational political actors. Their detractors for their part tend to depict this new current as neo-essentialist, making IS’ interpretation of Islam and their ideology the driving force of their actions. This opposite side prefers to dismiss any religiosity or political motivations in IS’ actions. Represented by Olivier Roy’s thesis<sup>8</sup>, he considers people who join the group as marginal misfits, largely ignorant of religion and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Michael Salla, “Political Islam and the West: a new Cold War or Convergence”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol 18 number4, 1997, p737

<sup>8</sup> Olivier Roy, “What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism?—A scientific perspective on the causes/circumstances of joining the scene”, 2015, [http://www.bka.de/nn\\_195186/EN/Publications/AutumnConferences/2015/autumnConferences2015\\_\\_node.html?\\_\\_nnn=true](http://www.bka.de/nn_195186/EN/Publications/AutumnConferences/2015/autumnConferences2015__node.html?__nnn=true)

geopolitics. Being “nihilists”, Roy considers that they are more attracted by the radicalism and the violence of the group rather than its political or religious agenda. Roy’s reaction to the last attacks on Paris was that the people joining IS now could have joined leftist terrorist groups 40 years ago, and considers therefore that “Radical Islam is more an Islamization of radicalism rather than a radicalisation of Islam”<sup>9</sup>. Another vision defended by Meriam Benraad considers that IS’ violence represents a reversed mirror of the entertainment society. This idea is based mostly on the propaganda effect of the group’s media production and how it mimics the codes of Hollywood productions and video games to attract westernised young people from all around the world. The group’s ideological and theological dress is therefore just an excuse for the release of violence produced by western civilisation.

Close to this idea is the crypto-Baathist explanation of IS’ actions. According to such a vision, the group’s ideology has little value in order to understand it. Its jihadist label and frames are just excuses representing a way for former regime elements to achieve the goal of coming back to power. Another current is what François Burgat calls “normative Islamology”<sup>10</sup> and is quite popular in the media of the Arab world and among political leaders by stating what “true Islam is”. According to this vision, the group is not Islamic and its nomination should be “Daech”, its pejorative acronym in Arabic. Therefore, an analyst should not give any credit to the group’s religious motivations because it is corrupting Islam for other purposes. We can agree with him to say that this vision has political implications that bring very few clues to the comprehension of the phenomenon from an academic dimension. Also, the question of whether the group is Islamic or not does not bring so much to the academic debate to understand the group and is more the affair of religious scholars within Islam or even Islamologists.

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<sup>9</sup> Olivier Roy, “France’s Oedipal Islamist Complex”, Foreign Policy, January 7 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/07/frances-oedipal-islamist-complex-charlie-hebdo-islamic-state-isis/>

<sup>10</sup> François Burgat, “Islamologie normative”, 2015, <http://www.tunivers.com/2015/04/94448/>

The debate on IS' motivations suffers from two problems. Firstly, it can be partially true for some categories inside the group (western recruits mainly), but it suffers from a reductionist western-centric scope. In addition, all the debate on IS' recruitment focuses mainly on the group's recruitment process of foreign fighters and neglects the local dynamics. Secondly, the debate regarding IS is driven by questions about its motivations as an organisation and for its members rather than its methods, tactics or strategy. The approach of this thesis is different since it tries to bring new clues to the explanation of the group's political and military behaviour. The purpose is not to understand the group's nature by answering the "Why?" question (if IS' actions are driven by, for example, religious purity, eschatology, nihilism, a Baathist comeback with new clothes, an anti-western backlash) but rather by answering the "How?" question. This means a focus on the group's tactics, strategy, and discourse and developing a locally centred perspective regarding the issue of the support enjoyed by the group. It examines the group's initiatives, ideology, strategic and military decisions rather than exogenous factors and sheds light on the recruitment of the local Iraqis instead of its foreign fighter component.

In the aftermath of IS' rise in 2013-2014, a striking number of books and research pieces have emerged centred on the central question of explaining its resurgence. Before that date, the group received little attention and was part of the academic debate explaining the fall of violence from 2007 in Iraq. Some books and studies are purely descriptive and informative; some have a sensationalist approach while others have decided to go back to history to make analogies. In recent years, research pieces have proved to be authoritative and tackle the issue from different perspectives. Researchers consider the group more as a resurgence of Saddam's military apparatus, the result of the Western imperialist mistakes (from Sykes-Picot to Paul Bremer's policies) or the consequence of President Al Maliki's sectarian policies. Others have advanced the political opportunities caused by the spillover of the Syrian crisis and the rise of the Sunni cause in Iraq as major factors behind its resurgence. Generally, publications' conclusions are policy recommendations rather than research-based investigations about the group. The research agenda regarding the study of the group is driven by the imperatives of actions against the group as part of the

broad war against violent extremism. Consequently, for their majority, researchers tend to prioritise the subject of countering its message, forecasting its end or its persistence instead of taking the time to understand and explain from different perspectives the reasons behind its spectacular rebound.

## 2-Common reasons advanced explaining IS´resurgence

Before the 2014 pivotal moment, the media and academic’s interest in the group had been declining since 2010 and the US withdrawal from Iraq. In 2014 the books “ISIS inside the Army of Terror”<sup>11</sup> and “ISIS: the state of Terror”<sup>12</sup> were the first chronological research pieces with the objective of vulgarising the group to the general public after its spectacular takeover of large parts of Iraq in June 2014. Those books provide an important amount of information about the group pointing out to its terrorist nature primarily and share a similar explanation of its emergence in 2003 and re-emergence in 2014. External causes, political opportunities as well as perceived grievances, are generally considered as the main causes to explain its growth and successes. The cited reasons behind the growth of the Sunni insurgency from which Zarqawi profited are the following: the Faith Campaign previously led by Saddam in the 1990s, the excesses of the Deebathification process, and the exclusion of the Sunnis from the new Iraqi state’s share power. Paul Bremer’s decision to dismember the Iraqi Army is presented as the primary cause behind the sudden strengthening of the Sunni rebellion because it left unemployed thousands of men with a military formation. This controversial decision, combined with Saddam Hussein’s promotion of conservative Islamic values among the society, made it easier for Saddam officers to convert to Salafism. Prisons such as Camp Bucca, considered by the Jihadi as “the University of Jihad”, where the whole spectrum of the Iraqi

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<sup>11</sup> Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *ISIS : inside the army of Terror*, Regan Arts New York, 2015

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Stern and J.M Berger, *ISIS: the state of Terror*, William Collins, London, 2015

insurgency mingled, also played a significant part in the recruitment process of the group.

The exhaustive study on IS conducted by Dr Muhammad Abu Ruhman and Hassan Abu Haniyeh entitled “The Islamic State the Sunni crisis and the struggle of Global Jihadism”<sup>13</sup> targets a public much familiar with the subject and can be considered as authoritative in terms of understanding the group. The authors defend two arguments in relation to IS’ rise and dynamics since its inception by Zarqawi’s *Tawheed Wal Jihad* (TWJ) group: its thriving was based on the Sunni resentment and sentiment of exclusion and that the seeds of the discord with Al Qaeda were planted at the very beginning of the group’s emergence in Iraq in 2003. Because of Al Qaeda’s inability and failure to establish themselves in the Arabian Peninsula they reluctantly submitted to Zarqawi’s conditions to have a presence in the highly strategic and symbolic Iraqi arena with its Iraqi branch (AQI) in 2004. During this period the first stages of the organisation’s “Iraqisation” process occurred. Years later, Iraqis came to dominate the upper echelons of the organisation’s leadership, at the expense of the Arab and foreign fighters. According to both authors, this “Iraqisation” permitted a deeper immersion of the group in the Sunni Iraqi society and was the main factor behind the orientation of the organisation’s goals and its later fixation on the Sunni cause. As they described, one of the most important arguments about the group’s success is the central rhetoric of the Sunni cause in “its doctrine, literature, speeches, and operations, and even into its strategic vision that later extended to include the Sunnis in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon”<sup>14</sup>.

Haniyah concludes that the IS is the result of developing and accumulating elements and mistakes that took place between 2003 and 2014 such as the reality of the US occupation, the expansion of Iranian influence and its domination

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<sup>13</sup> Hassan Abu Hanieh and Dr Mohamed Abu Ruhman, *The Islamic State organization : the Sunni Organization and the struggle for Global Jihadism* , Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Amman (368p),2015 <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/11458.pdf>

<sup>14</sup>Hassan Abu Hanieh and Dr Mohamed Abu Ruhman, *The Islamic State organization : the Sunni Organization and the struggle for Global Jihadism* , Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Amman ,2015, p72 <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/11458.pdf>

of Iraqi politics. This result is characterised by the new state of affairs of the Sunni community with its growing exclusion, the Sunni political vacuum and the absence of an inclusive and uniting political platform in the post-US withdrawal Iraqi political order. Two key factors worked in favour of the group. First, there was the rise of counter-revolution policies that reproduced authoritative regimes in the Arab world like in Egypt. IS' spectacular gains challenged the hope across the Arab world and especially among the Islamist groups which participated in elections that change was possible through peaceful means. Second, this "Sunni crisis" in Iraq and Syria erupted shifting the struggle and political allegiances in the region towards an identity and sectarian-driven conflict which fits into the IS' paradigm.

Finally, another research contribution regarding the question of Sunni grievances is that of Meriam Benraad and her book "Iraq: the revenge of History"<sup>15</sup>. She identifies the rise of the IS from a broader perspective among the Sunni Iraqi community. She describes the shift of their political horizon from the idea of an Iraqi national state to local protective secessionist aspirations that echo IS' agenda. She considers that the US' sectarian vision of a soft partition of Iraq and "Lebanese political power-sharing" planted the seeds of a partition which was welcomed by Kurds and the Islamic State of Iraq at the same time"<sup>16</sup>. The three-state-solution idea was developed first by US think tanks and caused the exclusion of the Sunnis. According to Benraad, they were profoundly attached to Iraq's unity. 2011 is, according to her, the year of the shift when Sunnis who participated in the political process and supported the secular candidate Iyad Alawi, felt betrayed and ended the dream of a unified Iraq. The fall of the influence of Sunni nationalist groups, such as the Council of the Ulemas of Iraq or nationalist insurgent groups such as the Army of Islam, symbolised this situation. Therefore, Sunnis began to reject Iraqi institutions as a solution to their marginalisation, at the same time as the rise in the promotion of the sectarian

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<sup>15</sup> Myriam Benraad, *Irak : la Revanche de l'histoire : de l'occupation étrangère à l'Etat Islamique*, Vendémiaire, Paris, 2015

<sup>16</sup> Ibid p 227



identity in the country and region. According to Benraad, by using the term “revenge”<sup>17</sup>, she considers that IS primarily thrived on the sentiment of revenge of the losers of the 2003 Iraq War.

In his book “Why Muslims rebel?” Mohamed Hafez has turned the question from how to why to explain the use of violence by Islamic movements across the globe. For our case study, his thesis offers another type of structural strain in explaining the emergence of IS. His thesis puts forward a political process approach to Islamist rebellion by analysing the political environment, the mobilisation structure and the ideological frames of militant organisations in Egypt and Algeria in the 1990s. According to Hafez, the key to explaining the use of violence by members of Islamist movements is not economic stagnation, excessive secularisation, or the groups’ ideology but mainly the lack of meaningful access to state institutions. He considers that state repression is at the root of Islamic rebellion movements. He argues that the timing and targeting of state-led repression are crucial elements that determine if a movement will rise and revolt — his in-depth study of Algerian and Egyptian Islamic armed groups in the 1990s argues that indiscriminate repression and targeting by the state has led to an ensuing circle of violence. It caused the emergence of the most extremely violent groups (such as the GIA) who lost touch with reality and constructed an “anti-system frame” that led to the denial of civilians’ neutrality. For our case study, nearly the same idea is defended by Omar Ashour. According to him, the political environment in the Middle East can be considered as a breeding ground for IS’ recruitment and ideology because in the region, legitimacy “is still obtained through religious advisory opinions (fatwa) or extreme nationalism”<sup>18</sup> while other factors such as constitutions, laws and elections are secondary factors. In addition, violence is still considered as an accepted way of accessing power. This repressive political environment is thus potentially giving credibility to IS’ tactics and generates cycles of violence from which the group can thrive.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid p254

<sup>18</sup>Omar Ashour, ““Enigma of ‘Baqiya wa Tatamadad’: The Islamic State Organization’s Military Survival”, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 19/04/2016

The weight of history has also had a profound impact on IS' emergence according to Jean Pierre Luizard in his book "The Daesh trap". The symbolic destruction of the Sykes-Picot Border by the IS in June 2014 is a focal point of his argumentation. Because they denounced the legitimacy of all the existing states of the region, Luizard argues that IS were able to appear as the only actor in the area who could present itself as the real inheritor of the Arab Spring. Indeed, by pronouncing its autonomy and sole dependence on the local civil society which compose itself, IS can emphasise its independence and exceptionalism, while at the same time armed groups of the rebellion in Syria are funded by foreign states<sup>19</sup>. By referring to Sykes Picot's agreement, IS was writing its struggle in the deep history against the imposed borders established by the French and British powers after the First World War. For Luizard, IS' success can be traced back to the weaknesses and contradictions of both Iraqi and Syrian nation-state models<sup>20</sup>. For decades, both have shared a self-destructive process of delegitimization which culminated in their collapse while producing fertile ground for IS. The first Iraqi state was created by the British and lasted 80 years, with the domination of the Sunni community and more specifically, Saddam's clan, which used pan Arabism and Iraqi nationalism to unite the country. In creating the second Iraqi state, the US relied on the Shia Arab majority to learn that paradoxically it is easier for a foreign power to install and put in power a minority rather than a majority. This is what France did in Syria with the Alawites and which the British and the Ottomans did in Iraq with the Arab Sunnis.

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<sup>19</sup>Jean Pierre Luizard, *Le piège Daesh*, Editions La Découverte, Paris, 2015, p35

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p147

### 3-Thesis contributions

Before entering into a detailed analysis of the core subject, I will explain the choice of strategy as a perspective to understand the resurgence of IS. Despite all the efforts against the group described previously, it managed to survive and manifested a tremendous capacity of resistance and adaptation. Moreover, it resurged with a meteoric rise between 2012 and 2014, achieving a result never attained by any Islamist or jihadi group in modern history: the control of territory across two countries and the proclamation of a caliphate in the heart of the Arab world. For the case study, the term resurgence describes the group's enterprise accurately in terms of the smallness of means while reaching achievements surpassing all expectations. Not only did the group recover from near destruction, but it bounced "back" from adversity, outperforming all its rivals to reach a position of dominance. The vast literature on the subject gives much more importance the endogenous dynamics of conflict with the combination of the flat terrain of Syria and Iraq and the military weakness of its opponents rather than the group's strategy in order to explain it. Commentators have considered that IS' resurgence had "less to do with its strategic acumen or compelling vision than with how Iraqi security institutions have come to embody the sectarianism, corruption and nepotism of the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki".<sup>21</sup> As precisely emphasised by a report of the RAND Corporation, until now "there is no empirically defensible assessment of a concise set of root causes that fuels and sustains IS"<sup>22</sup>.

Explaining IS' rebound by studying its strategy and its influence is also a way of assessing the group's flexibility between the reality of the political terrain and its ideological aspirations. For that purpose, I tackle this subject from three different perspectives: the group's tactics, strategy and grand strategy. These three

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<sup>21</sup> SARAH CHAYES, FREDERIC WEHREY, "Obama's Dangerous New Terror War " Politico, June 2014, [https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/obamas-dangerous-new-terror-war-108005#.U6Lqi0BaY\\_h](https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/obamas-dangerous-new-terror-war-108005#.U6Lqi0BaY_h)

<sup>22</sup>Connable, Ben, Natasha Lander, and Kimberly Jackson, Beating the Islamic State: Selecting a New Strategy for Iraq and Syria. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1562.html.p18](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1562.html.p18)

research scopes are divided accordingly to Liddle Hart's indirect approach angles of analysis to explain decisive victories across history. I argue that IS' resurgence in Iraq can be explained to a certain degree by the group's adherence to the guidelines presented by Liddle Hart, especially at the tactical and strategic levels. Of course, monocausal determinism cannot explain the complex phenomenon that brought IS to control large areas in Iraq and Syria. In the literature, elements such as resources, political opportunities, weaknesses of its adversaries and topographical elements have been advanced as causes to explain IS' lightning conquest in 2014. Many other factors have been suggested such as the structural strains of Iraqi society, the rise of sectarianism, the weakness of the Iraqi Army, the spillover of the Syrian conflict or the influx of foreign fighters but none of these possible explanations have focused on the group itself and its strategy.

The purpose of this thesis is to explain the group's resurgence between the end of 2011 and 2015 and contribute to filling this gap. It also tackles down some ideas about the lack of the strategy the group had or its limitation to the blind and exclusive following of its theorists. When associated with strategy, IS' scope is limited to a blind following of Abu Bakr Najji's *Management of Savagery* guidelines or to not have any at all. Max Abraham described IS as a group without a strategy and if it had one, was "infective and counterproductive"<sup>23</sup> because of its use of violence and its failure to learn from its predecessors. William Mac Cants for his part neglected any possibility for the group in conducting a heart and mind strategy.<sup>24</sup> I argue that IS developed a protracted strategy understood as identifying and prioritizing objectives; applying elements of power toward the attainment of the objectives; and balancing costs, risks, and expected gains. By explaining the resurgence only with endogenous factors and the weakness of the opposition can be considered to be limited. For example, the same analysts who neglect or refuse to IS any strategic thinking would only explain the success of the surge in 2006 from ISI's mistakes that violated cultural norms with its nearly

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<sup>23</sup> Max Abraham, *Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p89

<sup>24</sup> William Mac Cants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, St Martin's Press, 2015

indiscriminate violence against Sunni tribes which caused a favourable turnaround of the Dulaimi Tribal Confederation. This large, cohesive tribe within Anbar province laid the foundation of the “Sahawat,” bringing in other tribal entities. It would neglect the fact that U.S. reinforcements on the ground and better COIN strategy gave the American ground forces the upper hand.

The adoption of strategy as a scope of research to explain IS’ rise can contribute to expanding the research on the group and give additional insight into explaining its resurgence. Using the indirect approach as a theory to verify a hypothesis with empirical pieces of evidence has been done in very few studies. The mobilisation of the tactical guideline of non-confrontation and confrontation in a quantitative study of the operations claimed by the groups between 2012 and mid-2014 can offer a new vision of the tactical patterns and level of confidence the group had to confront the Iraqi Army at that time. The contribution of the study in understanding IS’ resurgence and IS’ rational decisions could also act as a counterweight to the importance given to ideology in IS’ military decisions.

Throughout the literature, many theses confront the issues of what drives IS’ actions: eschatology, Islamic culture or crypto-Baathism... One of the originalities of the study would be to adopt a new perspective by applying a universal doctrine on the group's actions assessing its learning and eclectic nature. The adoption of Liddle Hart’s principles of Grand Strategy may show a capacity of pragmatism and rational strategic thinking which has often been disregarded in the debate regarding the group. Indeed, by adopting the framework of Liddle Hart’s paradigm, this study would shed light on the group’s flexibility and capacity of adapting to circumstances, which sometimes are underreported in favour of its ideological purity and its harsh use of violence.

Sometimes considered as a terrorist group, an apocalyptic cult, a terrorist army, a proto-state, a revolutionary movement or a combination of these, there is a confusion not limited to academics regarding the nature of the Islamic State. As a result, most of the publications on the subject are mainly descriptive analyses of the ideology, structure and goals of the group. One of the obstacles to theory building in the study of a given group is that a shared research agenda does not unify multidisciplinary research. It is scattered among a variety of disciplines,

publications that tend to follow a narrow set of research questions, theoretical frameworks and methodologies, each determined by a particular disciplinary focus. For example, in the IS case, political scientists are most concerned by the Sunni grievances and the regional context to explain its growth. Sociologists tend to focus on the way the group is co-opting tribal components from its social incubator while religious and historical researchers will base their analysis by drawing parallels with past political manifestations comparable to IS' experience or methodology. The result is that disciplinary fragmentation has certainly produced a greater understanding of each particular element of the group. However, this has been done without developing models or frameworks that explain how all these elements fit together and interact. This study's contribution is to show how IS' military, political and social policies are complementary. For that reason, the study of IS' tactics and strategy for military operations coupled with its Grand Strategy for the political and social dimension, provides a holistic study of the organisation. This study is therefore different in its large scope as it tries to transcend the gap between terrorism and military studies. It also defies the essentialist approach of the group that requires an analysis only through the prism of its culture or ideology and instead, adopts a theory applicable to any other militant organisation or political entity that uses violence regardless of its size, ideology or goals.

The thesis' object of study, the Islamic State organisation, defies easy categorisation. It is a hybrid organisation in its nature as well as in its types of actions. In 2014-2015, it was able to shapeshift from an insurgent force into an army with a broad military repertoire. Its emergence and comeback were not random but took place in the context of a specific environment where it had to interact with a wide range of actors. I have chosen to study two kinds of interactions that fit its shapeshifting and multidimensional nature which are its strategy and propaganda. In its media, the group regularly engage in framing to justify its actions, articulate its goals and attract supporters. From a military perspective, it can evolve and mutate given the context and its strategic needs between the use of terrorism, insurgency or conventional warfare. This investigation tries to analyse the key development stages of this evolution more closely from a provincial perspective with the scope of Liddle Hart's theory. The

purpose of this research is to contribute to the debate on its nature and verify its hybrid nature as a social movement and a military organisation that transcends terrorism studies' narrow vision of the group.

Finally, the last contribution of the research on its resurgence between 2011 and 2015 is to put into perspective the group's return to an insurgency in Iraq in 2018. On December 9, 2017, IS had lost all its strategic territory in Iraq. Structural strains leading to the group's resurgence did not change much. The group did not vanish but retreated to remote areas waiting for an opportunity to come back. It has returned to guerrilla tactics in the country's rural areas. Despite Iraqi officials' claims, the group still has hundreds of fighters and hideouts in remote areas of the country like in 2011-2012 with the difference of having more resources and an international reach. With the progressive withdrawal of the US coalition from the country and the persistence of socio-economic and political strains in the country, the question of the group's re-emergence is likely to remain on the table. For that reason, the question of its past resurgence and the driving forces behind it stays relevant for the research community and policymakers.

#### **4-Literature's gaps and contributions of the study.**

I have identified the following gaps in the literature concerning the Islamist State in general and its resurgence in particular:

After scrutinising the extensive research on the subject, it emerges that a monocausal explanation of such a complex phenomenon as IS' resurgence is not possible. Even though this question seems to have been answered, this observation is half-true. Exogenous factors (structural strains, grievances, geopolitical context) have been extensively studied because of the relative ease in accessing them and the high level of comprehension in the academic world of the post-Saddam Iraq era and the issue of sectarianism. Endogenous factors proper to the group are, however, generally more difficult to access and less exposed in the literature; the only exception would be its ideology, which can partly explain the group's resilience. The group's relationship with the population it controls, its relations with the tribes, its strategy, its political behaviour, the

decision-making process inside its structures or the driving force behind its actions are still under-researched fields and have more questions than answers.

Furthermore, very few studies on IS follow a methodology of applying a deductive method by testing a hypothesis within a given theoretical framework. Most of the methods used in studies are somewhat inductive by collecting shreds of evidence and formulating a conclusion. In addition, most of the studies have a broader scope of analysis tending to adopt a holistic view of the group.

The period of 2003-2010 received extensive treatment in terms of the analysis of the reasons behind the group's demise as well as its organisational and resources structure. One of this study's contributions is to shed light on episodes of the group's recent history which remain under-investigated. IS' relations with the Sunni insurgency and the tribes or IS' prison breaks and urban assault campaigns can be considered as under-investigated so far. By adopting a provincial scope to study IS' tactics, the study may give a new vision on IS' tactical patterns. The provinces of Iraq are so different in terms of topography, actors involved, history of the group and social bonds that following a provincial angle of research can bring a new understanding of the phenomenon and explain more precisely the variations in the group's performances in Iraq during its resurgence. To explain the mobilisation of people joining IS, most of the research has tended to hyper-focus on the foreign fighters flow rather than the local recruiting process, which is one of the focuses of the thesis. One of the study's contributions would be to shed light on this dynamic by mobilising IS' frames of reference towards its targeted audience in Iraq.

Also, social movement theory (SMT) can provide a way to understand the group's attraction and popular support. I used the framing mobilization theory and decided not to use the relative Deprivation theory (RDT) and resource mobilization theories (RMT) for two reasons. First, because structural strains and the consequent grievances among the Sunni population as a research angle to understand the IS' resurgence is a subject widely tackled by many pieces of research focused on the state of the Sunni minority in Iraq since 2003. Other Sunni groups that could thrive on Sunni resentment did not witness the same successes that IS had and for that reason, the explanation of IS' resurgence only



from this angle is not sufficient. Secondly, I consider that resources are not sufficient to explain the group's resilience and resurgence especially because the group was always outnumbered and had less capacity than its opponents had.

### **5-Research Question**

#### **How can we explain IS' resurgence in Iraq from 2011 to 2015 with the scope of the indirect approach theory?**

The research answers the two following sub-questions:

**To what extent did IS adhere to Liddle Hart's indirect approach guidelines?**

**Did IS' frames in Iraq echoed the demands of the Sunni Arab population during the "Iraqi Spring"?**

The purpose of the study is to assess the reasons behind its resurgence from 2011 to 2015 using a new scope of research. This timeframe gives the possibility of having a comprehensive vision of the group's evolution and transformations in its nature, strategy, and discourse. Indeed, this period corresponds to the shift in structure and tactics the group witnessed from a terror organisation to a semi-conventional army.

#### **The objectives of this research investigation are the following:**

- Explain the group's rebound from two perspectives: Liddle Hart's strategic approach and the framing mobilisation theory.
- Assess to what extent the group's resurgence in 2012-2014 and decisive victories were due to its following of the indirect approach's principles.
- Determine the possible origins and influences on IS' strategy and discuss if the group had a Grand Strategy as defined by Liddle Hart and its implications in its relations with local and international actors.
- Find tactical patterns for IS' studied provinces.
- Verify if the group's frames have mirrored (or not) the protestors' demands and more generally the feeling of deprivation among the Sunni Arab population in Iraq.

- Ultimately, to have enough evidence to argue that strategy and framing during that period had a positive impact on the group's resurgence and discuss the implications, this can have on the debate on the group's nature.

This research investigation consists of seven chapters. In Chapter 2, I provide the theoretical framework I use to analyse the group's strategy based on the terrorism, insurgency and counter-insurgency doctrines, the indirect approach theory of Liddle Hart and the framing social movement theory. In Chapter 3, I provide a comprehensive methodological framework to explain IS' resurgence. In chapter 4, I present the literature on the IS military strategy. In Chapter 5, I introduce to the reader a historical background of IS in its diverse manifestations as an organisation using a provincial scope from 2003 to 2011. In Chapter 6, I analyse the group's tactical patterns and evolution between 2012 and 2014 following the same provincial scope by introducing a new categorisation of the group's military operations. In Chapter 7, I assess the adherence to LH's principles of the IS' prison break campaign in 2012-2013 and its urban assaults of 2014-2015. In Chapter 8, I discuss whether IS had a Grand Strategy as defined by LH's terms. I also study its relationship with Sunni tribes and Sunni insurgent groups and compare its frames of reference with the ones of the protestors during the Iraqi spring. As a conclusion, I summarise learning points from the study, present limitations, and further applications for other cases and discuss the study's implications.

## II- Theoretical Framework, Hypothesis, and Variables.

### [1-The validity of the terrorist organisation prism to analyse IS](#)

The concept of survival and success of militant organisations has particularly drawn the attention of researchers since the post-9/11 period. It has been studied more broadly in the framework of security and conflict studies by focusing not only on one defined group but by generally addressing the open question of under which conditions they end, survive or win. In recent years, many scholars have tried to understand the factors affecting the success of terrorist groups. In an article<sup>25</sup> written by Bloomberg, Gaibulloev, and Sandler, the three authors address the question of the survival of terrorist organisations between 1970 and 2007. They applied their analysis to a diverse set of 367 terrorist organisations. According to their findings, religious groups have better dispositions for survival than groups adopting other ideologies. A group's size also has an impact on its resilience since they have shown that "large groups that pursue a diversified mix of attack modes survive longer"<sup>26</sup>. Transnational groups have less ability to survive than groups operating only in their country, while groups based in the Middle East and North Africa generally last longer than their counterparts in other regions. Johns and Libicki's article<sup>27</sup> conducted within the framework of the Pentagon-funded RAND foundation research department analysed 648 non-state actors that existed between 1968 and 2006. They found that the most common way a terrorist group ends is by undergoing a transition to

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<sup>25</sup> Blomberg, S.B., Gaibulloev, K. & Sandler, "Terrorist group survival: ideology, tactics, and base of operations", T. Public Choice, 2011, p149: 441, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-011-9837-4>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Jones, Seth G. and Martin C. Libicki, "How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida", Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG741-1.html>

a political party (43 per cent). They also pointed out that religious groups are more resilient than other groups.<sup>28</sup> However, they found that not one religious group since 1968 was able to achieve victory. According to them, the size of the groups is determinant since groups composed of more than 10 000 members tend to be victorious more than 25% of the time, while small groups of less than 1000 members are systematically defeated. According to their data, 50% of insurgent groups ended after negotiating a settlement with the government, 25% achieved victory, and 19% were militarily defeated. In their assessment of Al-Qaeda's chances of success, they concluded in 2008 that their chance in overthrowing any government was close to zero.

Other recent works provide evidence for why terrorist groups fail. Blomberg, Engel, and Sawyer published a research article<sup>29</sup> in 2010 on the duration and sustainability of transnational groups. They tried to produce survivorship patterns of transnational terrorist organisations. They measured a terrorist group's sustainability through their capacity to mount attacks across successive periods. They consider that there are at least two types of terrorist organisations: "recidivists and one-hit wonders" and have shown that terrorist organisations, like firms, "display patterns of negative duration dependence". In other words, the younger an organisation, the more likely it is to cease to exist in the next period. They found that regional, socioeconomic, and political factors affect the survival of organisations. However, these factors do not significantly change the direction of duration dependence.

Laura Dugan and Joseph Young tried to answer the question of "why terrorist groups end?"<sup>30</sup> by applying the theory of outbidding to this issue and argue that

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<sup>28</sup> Approximately 62 percent of all terrorist groups have ended since 1968, but only 32 percent of religious terrorist groups have ended

<sup>29</sup>S. Brock Blomberg, Rozlyn C. Engel and Reid Sawyer, "On the Duration and Sustainability of Transnational Terrorist Organizations", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 54, No. 2, *Terrorism and Policy*, April 2010, pp. 303-330

<sup>30</sup> Young, Joseph K., and Laura Dugan, "Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8 (2), 2014.  
<http://terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/334/html>

the strategic environment for groups affects their survival. They considered that both the number of competitors and where the group is in the food chain influence its likelihood of survival. The originality of their article is that they offer a new characteristic that influences longevity, which is competition among groups. Other researchers tried to assess the resilience of terrorist groups by examining if inter-organisational violence had an impact on their resilience. Brian J Phillips, in his study<sup>31</sup>, focused on how often terrorist organisations attack each other and the impact on their resilience. According to his findings, intra-war can paradoxically contribute to the longevity of participating groups. He considered that violent rivalries encourage “civilians to take a side, inspire innovation; provide new incentives to group members”<sup>32</sup>. Martha Crenshaw, for her part, argued that when terrorist groups face stress from competing with each other, group members might defect or the group might splinter.<sup>33</sup> We see that in the research community there is a clear division on the question of whether or not, competition with other armed groups should ultimately help or hurt the survival of terrorist organisations.

Jenna Jordan’s researches focused on studying the resilience of militant groups after having lost a leader<sup>34</sup>. She measured the organisational resilience of a range of terrorist organisations. In 2014, she extended her contribution to theoretically and empirically assess the efficiency of the US targeting campaign against Al Qaeda’s leadership<sup>35</sup>. By applying a theory of organisational resilience to this strategy, she concluded that it is inefficient and is likely counterproductive. She found that it did not have sufficient impact to degrade Al Qaeda’s “organisational

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<sup>31</sup> Brian J Phillips, “Enemies with benefits? Violent rivalry and terrorist group longevity”, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 52(1), 2015, pp 62–75.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

<sup>33</sup> Crenshaw, Martha, “An organizational approach to the analysis of political terrorism”, *Orbis* 29(3), (1985), 465–489.

<sup>34</sup> Jenna Jordan, “When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation”, *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (October 2009), pp. 719–755.

<sup>35</sup> Jenna Jordan, “Attacking the leader : Missing the Mark”, *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4, (Spring 2014), pp. 7–38,

resilience”, which she referred to as “the capacity to a group that has experienced degradation to still engage in terrorist activity”.<sup>36</sup>

From the range of studies conducted to explain the resilience of non-state political actors, we can say that ideology, geography, modes of attack, structure, and competition with other actors are factors affecting the resilience of a group. The profile of the IS as a religious group based in the Middle East having a diversified mode of attack and engaged in competition makes it, according to their findings, the perfect candidate for being a resilient terrorist organisation. However, the only scope of terrorism is not sufficient to fully understand the IS phenomenon even though this tactic constitutes a portion of the group’s overall activities. Hoffman explained that terrorist organisations "do not function in the open as armed units, generally do not attempt to seize or hold territory, deliberately avoid engaging enemy military forces in combat, are constrained both numerically and logistically from undertaking concerted mass political mobilisation efforts, and exercise no direct control or governance over a populace at either the local or the national level."<sup>37</sup> Daniel Byman argued that the majority of the groups that do not hold territory and lack popular support, yet use terrorism as a tactic, can be considered proto-insurgencies.<sup>38</sup> The psychological effect of terrorism is according to Metz higher right now for insurgents because of the multiplying effect its mediatisation shape the beliefs, perceptions, or morale of those living far away.<sup>39</sup> The fact that information technology amplifies the psychological effects of a terrorist incident by publicising it to a much wider audience makes the insurgent more prone to use this tactic. Because IS does not represent only a terrorist organisation, it also evolved to an insurgency, the use of the "insurgent group" conceptual framework

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid p9

<sup>37</sup> Byman, Daniel, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies: RAND Counterinsurgency Study -- Paper 3*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007, p170.

<sup>38</sup> Moghadam, Assaf, Ronit Berger, and Polina Beliakova. "Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent: Labeling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 5 (2014): 2-17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26297258>.

<sup>39</sup> Metz, Steven. *Rethinking Insurgency*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007

can contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of its resurgence and a better appreciation of the goals that the group is trying to attain<sup>40</sup>. Thus, this approach places terror attacks within the broader strategic framework of insurgency and can help avoid confusion between a mean and an end.

## *2-The guerrilla warfare scope for explaining IS resurgence*

U.S. Army/ U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual defines insurgency. It describes insurgency as “an organised, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.”<sup>41</sup> It synthesises the dominant view among insurgency and counter-insurgency (COIN) theorists Guerrilla warfare consists of the use of military and political resources to mobilise the population, conduct hit and run attacks and undermine the opponent’s will to fight. The primary goal is not to destroy a stronger enemy, but to undermine its morale by exhausting him, causing lethargy and defections among its ranks. This strategy is a long-term one that requires patience and resilience. Being outnumbered and outgunned, since the 1980s insurgent groups have improved their capacities and increased their success against conventional armies. Military theorists and researchers advanced many factors to explain it. Its modern root can be traced back to the first anti-colonial war of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led by Abdel Krim Al Khattabi in the Rif region in Northern Morocco against Spain and France.<sup>42</sup> His tactics inspired many theorists such as Mao, Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh and emulated other rebellions throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. First, the concept of popular support was

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<sup>40</sup> Beliakova, Polina, and Ronit Berger, Assaf Moghadam. 2014. "Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent: Labeling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors." Perspectives on Terrorism (October). <http://terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/374/html>.

<sup>41</sup> United States. Department of the Army. The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: US Army Field Manual No. 3-24: Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5. University of Chicago Press, 2007

<sup>42</sup> Mevliyar Er (2017) Abd-el-Krim al-Khattabi: The Unknown Mentor of Che Guevara, Terrorism and Political Violence, 29:1, 137-159, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2014.997355

popularised by Mao Zedong as a critical factor behind the success of insurgencies. By evolving in their societies like “Fish in the water”<sup>43</sup>, insurgents must possess the support of the population. Counterinsurgency manuals share this idea with their objective of winning the hearts and minds of a neutral public. Liddle Hart’s writings on guerrilla warfare also pointed to this factor: “guerrilla movements depend on the attitude of the people in the area where the struggle takes place, on their willingness to aid it by providing information and supplies.”<sup>44</sup>

According to Robert Bunker, the most identifiable form of insurgency was theorized by Mao in 1937 with the concept of people’s war “where peasant armies are integrated into a politico-military phase strategy in order to take over the state.”<sup>45</sup>. Mao believed that mobilisation of the population was key in order to achieve victory. The purpose of his doctrine was to provide the necessary strategy, tactics and techniques to defeat larger and better equipped military forces. The specificity of his strategy is its reliance on the peasantry as the main force for its Communist-led peasant insurrection. Massive mobilization coupled with the indoctrination of the masses is considered as the basis for military mobilization in order to build a capable revolutionary army. His three-phase strategy before ultimate victory was developed during the early years of the Sino-Japanese War. This long campaign starts with a preservation phase of defence and retreat, followed by an expansion phase corresponding to a long period of stalemate, during which the Chinese would build up their forces, and the decisive strategic counteroffensive that would achieve a final Chinese victory. According to Ralph Powell, this three-stage nature of the protracted war does not apply to other insurgencies and take its strength in the specificities of China<sup>46</sup>. It relies on

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<sup>43</sup> Citation of Mao Ze Dong "The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea", [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the\\_guerrilla\\_must\\_move\\_amongst\\_the\\_people\\_as\\_a/216649.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_guerrilla_must_move_amongst_the_people_as_a/216649.html)

<sup>44</sup> Liddle Hart , *Strategy*, Meridian Book, 2nd edition 1967, p367

<sup>45</sup>Robert J. Bunker, *Old and New Insurgency Forms*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2016, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Ralph L. Powell, *Maoist Military Doctrines*, Asian Survey, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Apr., 1968), University of California Press, pp. 239-262, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2642200> Accessed:



the use of vast areas in order to strategic retreat. It requires absolute local superiority of forces while concentrating powers against an objective, despite overall inferiority of forces. This strategy believes that victory can be achieved with superior ratio against the enemy in a ratio of between two and six to one.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, Mao's strategy requires a high number of ideologically motivated fighter scattered in a vast terrain who concentrate on the weak points of the enemy. His tactic requires manoeuvrability and a rapid concentration and dispersal of forces highlighted by this citation: "The enemy advances, we retreat. The enemy halts, we harass. The enemy tires, we attack. The enemy retreats, we pursue."<sup>48</sup>

Two researchers have used Mao guerrilla warfare principles to explain IS' resurgence. First, Craig Whiteside defends the idea that IS shares the attributes of revolutionary movements by establishing a parallel between its strategy and Mao's guerrilla warfare principles. According to the author, "using Mao's revolutionary warfare framework, particularly his three stages of a conflict, provides a more holistic view of the organisation for both understanding and action"<sup>49</sup>. Regarding the question of IS' nature he considers that often described as a 'terror group', the Islamic State fits the definition of a movement conducting an insurgency, defined as an armed struggle dedicated to replacing the government. For him, the Islamic State is revolutionary because it seeks to replace state governance and reject the international order utterly. After seizing territories, the group proved its ability to establish order and apply its ideology in areas where anarchy was prevailing, punish "defectors" while rewarding supporters, and provide basic services and governance to the population. For Whiteside, the group is primarily a guerrilla organisation conducting murders,

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<sup>47</sup> Ralph L. Powell, Maoist Military Doctrines, Asian Survey, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Apr., 1968), University of California Press, pp. 239-262, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2642200> Accessed:

<sup>48</sup> Ibid p252

<sup>49</sup> Craig Whiteside, The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare, Small Wars & Insurgencies, 27:5, (2016), 743-776, DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2016.1208287

robberies, sabotages and terrorist attack and there are no conventional battles and no blitzkrieg in its 'long attrition struggle' to wear down the will of the enemy.<sup>50</sup>

His statement is partially true, most of IS' activity can be explained from the long recovery phase, even though its mobilisation of the population takes another shape and its manoeuvres in the decisive phase are completely different from the urban assaults of IS in 2014 that led to the fall of many cities in its hand. Whiteside also recognised that the difference between IS tactics and that Marxist groups are "the extent to which conventional military fighting is enacted from very early on, both in Syria and Iraq."<sup>51</sup> On the contrary, Stathis Kalyvas another author defending the revolutionary nature of IS considers that it is "the main type of combat that ISIS uses so far which differentiates it from other jihadi rebels, such as the Algerian GIA"<sup>52</sup>, for instance.

Even though there are similarities between Mao's strategy and the resurgence of the IS, there are some limits to attribute to this theory a comprehensive explanation to IS' rise. Maoist doctrine envisioned conventional war as the final stage of the war where conventional mobile war and even positional war were to take place where ultimate victory could be won only by regular forces fighting a mobile fluid war. This scenario did not apply to many successful guerrillas later, where, as described by Ralph Powell, "protracted guerrilla conflict alone can win an insurrectionary war, or at least create a long and costly war that could help to overextend the United States, create increasing domestic opposition in the U.S."<sup>53</sup> For IS case study, it has the attributes of an insurgent revolutionary force, but it did not wait to match in firepower and human ratio the Iraqi Army after

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid p745

<sup>51</sup> Craig Whiteside (2016) The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27:5, 743-776, DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2016.1208287

<sup>52</sup> Kalyvas, Stathis N. "Is ISIS a Revolutionary Group and If Yes, What Are the Implications?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 42-47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26297413>.

<sup>53</sup> Ralph L. Powell, *Maoist Military Doctrines*, Asian Survey, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Apr., 1968), University of California Press, pp. 239-262, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2642200> Accessed: p253

having indoctrinated the “Sunni Masses” with its ideology to launch its decisive assaults on the Iraqi cities. For IS, mass recruitment of peasant was not an essential source of manpower compared to foreign fighters.

The other criticism addressed to the comparison of IS’ resurgence to the success of past revolutionary insurgent is the significant place of external support from states in their performance. Galula considered outside support as one of the four conditions for a successful insurgency. He added that during the middle and later stages of an insurgency, it might become a necessity.<sup>54</sup> John Pustay noted that insurgency might be supported by the supply of external aid from friendly Communist states <sup>55</sup>. McCuen expressed a stronger view in his classic book, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: The Strategy of Counterinsurgency*. McCuen wrote, “Seeking outside support must be a vital principle of revolutionary strategy. There can be little question as to the importance of the revolutionaries to gain such outside support.”<sup>56</sup> Byman, Chalk, Hoffman, Rosenau, and Brannan found that although states remained the most important source of external support to insurgents, non-state actors also contributed significantly.<sup>57</sup> Their conclusion confirmed that “external support for an insurgency can make a movement far more effective, prolong the war, and increase the scale and lethality of the struggle.”<sup>58</sup> Maoist and communist insurgencies received revolutionary doctrine, training and arms support from states such as USSR, China or Cuba. We can conclude that evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that state-led external support is a decisive factor in determining the outcome of an insurgency. In the

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<sup>54</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A Praeger, 1964. Reprint, New York: Frederick A Praeger, 2005), 39-42.

<sup>55</sup> John S. Pustay, *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (New York, The Free Press, 1965), 103-104.

<sup>56</sup> John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: The Strategy of Counterinsurgency* (1966. Reprint, St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2005), 66.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), 1.

<sup>58</sup> Bruce J. Reider, *External Support to Insurgencies*, *A small wars journal*, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/external-support-to-insurgencies>

case of IS, external support from states was absent. Therefore it lacked one of the most important causes of success for an insurgent guerrilla.

The intertwining of political actions with kinetic actions in IS military doctrine is rarely mentioned today about the Islamic State. It contributes to the literature by making analogies with a revolutionary movement and can be relevant in order to understand this phenomenon better. However, viewing the Islamic State only through a revolutionary warfare prism can narrow down the explanation of its resurgence. First of all, because using only this lens can be considered as using an outdated scope to understand a modern phenomenon. As Metz argued, modern insurgencies are in essence different and more complex than classical insurgent models as defined by Mao.<sup>59</sup> The requirement of mobilising the population is less critical for contemporary insurgencies which are more focused on violence. Organisations are more organized as flat flexible networks than rigid hierarchical organisations. The absence of state support makes these insurgencies to develop a wide array of partnership and alliances with new actors. They can use a base of supporters outside the country and ideological supporters who share a political perspective or business partners to provide information and armaments. As explained by Metz, a complex web of links means less need for a mass base. Insurgents nowadays still need the acquiescence of the population but rely less on them for information, money and labour. Social Media are used for recruitment and building linkages with other groups. Contemporary insurgencies are more focused on violence, on coercion rather than the patronage of the population. For example, before its assault on the city, IS in Mosul is said to have raised more than 8 million dollars of revenue through racketing.<sup>60</sup> Modern insurgencies such as IS, also have a new kind of relationship

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<sup>59</sup> Metz, Steven. *Rethinking Insurgency*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007

<sup>60</sup> Hélène Sallon, *L'État islamique de Mossoul : Histoire d'une entreprise totalitaire*, Cahier Libres, 2018

with new actors such as rival militias in a failed state context which affects and shape the conflict.

Geography and topography are also considered as essential variables for the success of an insurgency. Liddle Hart defended this idea while commenting on the success of Lawrence of Arabia's led insurgency against the Ottoman Empire. Mao believed that in massive countries, guerrilla warfare was more efficient because of how easy it was to target government forces' supply lines.<sup>61</sup> The vastness of the Anbar and Al Jazeera desert has indeed helped the group to hide in this ocean of sand. Nevertheless, the terrain in Iraq is desert and flat and not suitable (except Diyala) for guerrilla warfare. Zarqawi was aware of this geographic factor back in 2004 when describing the difficulty his nascent group was facing: "We are fighting a battle that is not equal in a sense. There is no comparison between our capabilities and the enemy's resources. [...] What the Mujahedeen possess cannot compare with the enemy's resources... The land of Jihad in Iraq is different from Afghanistan and Chechenia. The brothers are helped either by forests or mountains can hide from the enemy and prevent him from reaching. Iraq is flat without mountains, wadis or forests. Another problem is that the battlefield is a close engagement. The brothers are fighting one of the fiercest battles in human history. They are fighting while lacking many supportive conditions. They have no strategic depth or an area unattainable. The enemy is behind them in front of them, on their right and on their left".<sup>62</sup>

Galula considered geography as an important factor. It helps the insurgent as it is rugged and difficult, either because of mountains and swamps or because of the vegetation.<sup>63</sup> He concluded that a cause, police and administrative weakness in the counterinsurgent camp are musts for a successful insurgency and a not-too-hostile geographic environment.

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<sup>61</sup> Mao Zedong, "On Protracted War" (Republic of China: Foreign Language Press, 1938 [1967]), p17

<sup>62</sup> Ahmed S Hashim, *The Caliphate at war*, Hurst and Company London, 2017, p87

<sup>63</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, PRAEGER SECURITY INTERNATIONAL 1966, p24

The combination of the three elements behind the success of insurgencies in the recent period, namely, popular support and mass mobilisation, geography and external support, are insufficient in explaining the success of IS' insurgency. IS' ideology does not promote popular support as a key strategic objective, its recruitment strategy was not targeting the masses, Iraq's terrain is flat and not suitable for guerrilla warfare and there is no substantial proof of any support received by IS in its history from state actors. For that reason, I prioritise in this research investigation a theoretical framework not limited to guerrilla strategy only. Studying the group's strategy needs to take into account the transformation it has undergone in its 15 years of existence. Throughout this period, it has evolved from guerrilla and terrorist tactics to the use of conventional warfare with the objective to directly attack enemy forces and seize territory. Its abilities have also developed to hold sufficient skill and leadership attributes and defeat with minimal resources technologically and numerically superior foes.

As developed by Whiteside, we agree that IS is a hybrid insurgent-terrorist group: It is at once a large-scale, semi conventional insurgent force that has seized considerable territory from the governments of Iraq and Syria, and an international terrorist organisation that encourages or conducts clandestine operations and attacks around the world. However, the fact that IS is a modern insurgent group as defined by Metz with all the new attributes of an insurgency make the guerrilla scope a bit outdated. IS has also morphed to a conventional force so quickly and applied its rule over a country with the size of Great Britain governing 8 million inhabitants that it propelled the group to show new prerogatives in a new context that the Maoist guerrilla warfare theory cannot explain entirely.

### **3-Inspiration from its enemies: IS' COIN strategy.**

IS' peak of power in late 2014-2015 upgraded its capabilities from a clandestine insurgent force focused on terrorist activities to a proto-state using counterinsurgent strategies. Even though the group reached a state level only at the end of 2014, It started to imagine itself as a state very early. From its inception as *Tawheed wal-Jihad*, IS' prime objective was to create and sustain a

transnational state based on its interpretation of Sharia. It believed that this could be achieved only by violence and should be organised to control territory and a population. The general strategic long-term objective, which defines the purpose of war, comes from different Quran verses calling the believers to fight until there is no “Fitnah”<sup>64</sup>. This order poses the basis of the group’s state of peace for which war is waged until religion is dominant over other systems of belief. After the declaration of the caliphate, IS’ media became more vocal about the group’s overall strategy. In its first issue,<sup>65</sup> Dabiq magazine outlined the five phases of IS’ strategy in an article entitled *from Hijrah to Khalifah*:

1-*Hijrah* (lit emigration)]; refers to the gathering towards a place when the group can find a haven from where it can operate without the threat of being harmed. It can be anywhere in the world, preferably in a land governed by a weak central authority to use as a base. There, a *jama’ah* can form, recruit members and train them.

2-*Jama’ah* [congregation]; refers to the necessity to have ideological and theological cohesion among the group by following the Sunni Salafi creed.

3. *Nikaya* [harming] is the phase when the group can thrive through violent actions creating as much as chaos as possible within the boundaries of Sharia.

4. *Tamkin* [consolidation]; this phase constitutes a midterm achievement preceded by several *Nikaya* attacks. As described by the author, these attacks “will compel apostate forces to partially withdraw from a rural territory and regroup in major urban regions”. The *jama’ah* will use “*tawahhush*” (“mayhem”) in order to take advantage of the situation.

5. *Khalifah* [God’s vicar on Earth] is the final step where the group fills the vacuum, building a state and expanding its territory.

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<sup>64</sup> “And fight them until there is no fitnah and [until] the religion, all of it, is for Allah. And if they cease - then indeed, Allah is seeing of what they do”. Verse 8:30 , Quran

<sup>65</sup> Dabiq Magazine , First Issue , July 2014 <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/islamic-state-22dc481biq-magazine-122.pdf>

These guidelines are not specific to the case study and are applicable to every terrain by the group's affiliates in the world. This strategic declaration is long-term in its aspiration but still, not holistic since it mostly mentions the military means used to achieve the strategic objective of declaring the caliphate. The investigation's timeframe corresponds to the resurgence period between 2012 and 2014, following the setbacks underwent between 2007 and 2010. Abu Bakr Naji's book appeared in hard copy in 2004, while Zarqawi had already begun his activities in Iraq. Naji was never part of his nascent group in 2003 nor the Islamic State and was most likely based in Afghanistan. When Abu Bakr Al Naji published his strategic guidelines in 2004, they were destined to guide jihadist groups for state-building in the post the 9/11 world in Iraq, Somalia, Yemen and Mali. Its work was never specific to the building of an Islamic State in Iraq.

We can find the traces of the elaboration of an IS' Grand Strategy in a strategic document produced by the group between its fall in 2008 and the start of its resurgence in 2012. During that period, a 55-page document began to circulate in ISI's forums online about a new strategy to gain the upper hand in Iraq. Entitled "Strategic Plan to improve Islamic State of Iraq's political position"<sup>66</sup>, its title reveals its aspiration of adopting a new long-term political approach in its changing environment. It was published by an editor called *Mufakirat Fallujah* during the month of *Moharram* 1431 corresponding to January of 2010. Surprisingly, this strategic document was not a set of guerrilla warfare guidelines but rather a set of principles built upon counterinsurgency strategies. It exposes the long-term new approach of ISI's recently almost defeated entity not only in military terms but mostly adopting a political approach. This focus on politics confirms Galula statement that "a revolutionary war is 20 per cent military action and 80 per cent political"<sup>67</sup> or General Sir Frank Kitson statement that "there can be no such thing as a purely military solution to an insurgency because

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<sup>66</sup> Khitta Istratijiyya li Ta'zeez al-Mawqif al-Siyasi li Dawlat al-'Iraq al-Islamiya," (Lit., A Strategic Plan to Strengthen the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq), Accessible in Arabic at <https://issuu.com/13782/docs>

<sup>67</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1964, reprinted 2006, p. 63.



insurgency is not primarily a military activity”.<sup>68</sup> This general strategy could have started to be implanted before its release to the public, as argued by Craig Whiteside<sup>69</sup>.

The document appeared to build on Abu Naji’s work but was more specifically focused on ISI’s context and its environment in Iraq. The first idea defended by the author is to declare that the Islamic State will remain (*Baqiya*) despite its recent setback. Because its return is part of “*Sunnan Allah*”, which refers to God’s universal rules, its members will always come back after being tested by God with military setbacks. The document starts by forecasting the US withdrawal from Iraq and presenting the necessary measures in order to prepare itself for this game-changing event.

The document states that ISI’s new strategy should follow three important guidelines for its military actions. While the first years of the US occupation consisted of having a reactive posture, this new phase requires being proactive. The maxim “nine bullets for the apostates and one bullet for the occupants”<sup>70</sup> highlights the first guideline in a sentence. Its objective is to raise the level of fear to deter anyone from joining the security forces allied with the US. The perspective of being killed or injured should surpass the one of remaining safe for the average Iraqi citizen willing to join the security forces. This effort of deterrence should cause massive desertions and create widespread reluctance among the population in applying for this kind of job. It is also thought to be a long-term one to break the enemy’s morale. The author adds that this targeting campaign needs to be part of a holistic approach combined with a media campaign showing the Islamic forbidding of joining government forces. These threats should be counterbalanced by a positive discourse focusing on the

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<sup>68</sup> British Army Field Manual, Volume 1 Part 10, Countering Insurgency Army Code 71876, October 2009, p 18

<sup>69</sup> Whiteside, C, “Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State’s Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006-2017)”, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague 9, 2018, <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ICCT-Whiteside-Nine-Bullets-For-The-Traitors-September-2018.pdf>

<sup>70</sup> Ibid p34

rewards and Islamic benefits in the afterlife of not collaborating with the government.

The second strategic guideline developed by the document is “Cleansing”. Quoting Sun Tzu, the author considers that to decrease the number of its opponents, one has to “inflict on them destruction with possible damage and make them worry about their internal problems”<sup>71</sup>. “Cleansing the places”, equals a scorched earth policy by focusing only on destroying the enemy’s infrastructure. It also consists of an economic effort in order to damage the enemy’s infrastructure and keep him occupied with rebuilding concerns.

The third guideline, called “Targeting”, is part of a comprehensive effort to eliminate Iraq’s charismatic leaders from the military and the political spheres. It also refers to the targeting of the Iraqi Army’s most experienced units, particularly the capable minority represented by the SWAT teams and the Golden Division. Prominent political figures must also be targeted in order to create a void in the political process and ignite tensions and frictions among communities. The success of such operations will have a strong repercussion by undermining the government’s reputation in society and abroad. In the tactical part of the study, we saw how the group applied a decapitation policy in each of the five provinces where political leaders, military commanders, and leaders of Sahawat militias method using different modus operandi. We will also show how the group, despite being an insurgency, developed the capabilities of Special operations forces by conducting sophisticated attacks on high-value targets using Special Forces units like during the Abu Ghraib prison break.

In many aspects, the strategic document seems to have borrowed from the counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps<sup>72</sup>. This strategy, designed in 2006 by General Petraeus is inspired by many principles of

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid p36

<sup>72</sup> United States. Department of the Army. The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: US Army Field Manual No. 3-24: Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5. University of Chicago Press, 2007

the Indirect Approach to insurgency in Iraq between 2006 and 2010. This way of understanding COIN is now the ascendant strategy to confront low-intensity conflict, whether terrorism or insurgency. It is a population-centric approach based on irregular warfare techniques and COIN capabilities to combat violent subversion and to protect the indigenous population. It follows a sequence of “clear, hold, build, and transfer.” The following four principles are considered as the basis of this strategy 1) winning the hearts and minds of populations under insurgent threat; 2) gathering detailed intelligence on foes; 3) wielding psychological carrots more than military sticks; 4) and teaming SOF with surrogate forces most likely from part of the insurgents. One the most critical achievement of General Petraeus’ strategy was its ability to infiltrate and divide the Sunni insurgent movement in 2006 and try to make it ineffective with the creation of the Awakening Tribal councils or Sahawats.

The author of IS’ 2010 document recognises that the United States’ idea of creating Sahawat councils was smart and bold. By arming local tribes, they converted them as a shield for their forces against ISI’s attacks. The creation of the “Awakening Jihadi Council”<sup>73</sup> is presented in the document as an important decision in order to achieve ISI’s long-term objectives. The author labelled Sahawat’s rise and successes with the Arabic word “*ibtilia*”, meaning “part of Allah’s trial”.<sup>74</sup> According to him, tribal customs forbid tribes in Iraq from working with the occupation forces. However, this time two incentives pushed them: money, with the cash flow coming from the US and later from the Iraqi Government to tribal leaders; and also their reluctance and hate for the punishments included by the Sharia imposed by the ISI. For him, these two motives could not stand in the long term because one day the financial support would dry up and the morale, prestige and popular support of their leaders would vanish because of their corruption. For that reason, he considered that the seeds of Sahawat’s future failure had been planted during their creation. ISI could,

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<sup>73</sup>Khitta Istratijiyya li Ta’zeez al-Mawqif al-Siyasi li Dawlat al-’Iraq al-Islamiya,” (Lit., A Strategic Plan to Strengthen the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq), Accessible in Arabic at <https://issuu.com/13782/docs> Ibid p38

<sup>74</sup> Ibid p39

therefore, use as a base the Sahawat experience and its awaited fall to create a more successful model.

Another key point of the document is that the ISI should strengthen the local population it controls in order to provide stability and security in their area. ISI's new tribal model should pass through tribal leaders in order to create militias of locals that will defend their neighbourhood from government forces and bandits. The "Islamic Awakening Jihadi Council", according to the author, finds an echo in Islamic scriptures and Prophet Muhammad's policy towards the "*wofod*", "the newcomers" arriving at his capital Medina. When new tribes were coming to Medina and pledged allegiance to him, he named the leaders of these tribes as local leaders and empowered them by preserving their structure and arming them. Each local tribal leader should be accompanied by a local military leader appointed and vetted by IS' scholars. Local tribal leaders can receive financial support, not as mercenaries but after having genuinely espoused the group's ideology. Financial incentives may come from the bounties as well as from the group's budget. From the RAND corporation's extensive report on ISI finances<sup>75</sup>, these types of resource allocation to tribes or local militias were not part of IS' previous organisational financial model in 2006. By forming its own Sahawat, ISI may enjoy new strategic outcomes according to the writer. First, by not dispersing its troops and relying on auxiliaries, it will not concentrate its forces, which will make them less easily targeted. It confirms that using auxiliary forces is the element from counterinsurgency strategies that follow the spirit of the indirect approach. The use of minimum necessary force has been a fingerprint of the British army's interventions.<sup>76</sup>

Galula, one of the most important thinker on the subject considered that the battle for the population was a significant characteristic of the revolutionary war. The objective being the population itself, the operations designed to win it over (for

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<sup>75</sup> Bahney, Benjamin, Howard J. Shatz, Carroll Ganier, Renny McPherson, and Barbara Sude, "An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq", Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1026.html>.

<sup>76</sup> British Army Field Manual, Volume 1 Part 10 Countering Insurgency , October 2009, p 313

the insurgent) or to keep it at least submissive (for the counterinsurgent) are primarily political in their nature. After cleaning an area, the population becomes the objective for the counterinsurgent as it was for his enemy. Galula considered that the insurgent challenges its tacit support and submission to law and order which were taken for granted in normal times. He advanced the idea that the technique of power consists of “relying on the favourable minority in order to rally the neutral majority and to neutralize or eliminate the hostile minority”<sup>77</sup>.

Keep it passive was more a realistic objective for IS whose codes and practices of religion could create rejection in cities such as Mosul for example. Except for some strongholds in the old city, IS did not reach the population before the fall of the city, (except by collecting taxes). Not being a mass movement, IS had to win over the population and conquer the hearts and minds after its takeover by providing services to the locals. It was a large scale application of its governance on one of the biggest cities of the Middle East. During the first month of the conquest of Mosul in 2014, it started by offering services and goods to the population in the same way a conventional army would carry out a COIN policy based on winning over the population. During the initial phase, it offered salaries, subsidies and support to the poor, claimed to fight corruption and improve the general daily life. According to Helene Sallon’s investigation, for the Sunni Arabs of the city, as long as they received salaries and paycheck from the Iraqi Government,<sup>78</sup> the situation was acceptable. However, the end of their salaries in 2015, the harsh restrictions of war, the intense bombardment of the city and the paranoia of IS members degraded the relations deeply between IS and the population in Mosul. At the same time, against insurgents and potential spies, it launched a harsh counterinsurgent policy (based on extensive intelligence networks and local informants, forcible disappearance, assassinations). The fact that IS used insurgency and terrorism for anti-guerrilla warfare echoes general Kitson’s formula for waging asymmetric war with the concept of the ‘counter-gang’

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<sup>77</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1964, reprinted 2006, p53

<sup>78</sup> Hélène Sallon, *L’État islamique de Mossoul Histoire d’une entreprise totalitaire*, Cahier Libres, 2018,

or 'pseudo-gang'. To defeat an insurgency, he applied this concept in Kenya or Northern Ireland by conducting anti-insurgent raids with violent and insurgent methods by recruiting former insurgents embedded with regular troops. They had a better knowledge of their enemy, intelligence gathering superiority and could act outside the boundaries of the law (tortures, false flag operations, extra judiciary killings).

#### **4- Propaganda as a tool for mobilisation**

As an insurgent force or by using COIN methods in a position of dominance what characterises IS politico-military action is the necessity of defending a well-grounded cause that attracts supporters among the population. In the literature of the practice of insurgency and counterinsurgency, ideology rather than an organisation is considered as important. If ideology is necessary for producing popular support and mobilisation, the way it can spread it through and generate mobilisation is as important. First, the concept of popular support was popularised by Mao Zedong as a critical factor behind the success of insurgencies. By evolving in their societies like "Fish in the water"<sup>79</sup>, insurgents must possess the support of the population.

As detailed by *David Galula*, the first basic need for an insurgent who aims at more than merely making trouble is an attractive cause, particularly given the risks involved and because the early supporters and the active supporters—not necessarily the same persons—have to be recruited by persuasion. Propaganda becomes an essential and powerful weapon. The population represents the ground battle between the insurgent and the counterinsurgent. Counterinsurgency manuals share this idea with their objective of winning the hearts and minds of a neutral public. Liddle Hart's writings on guerrilla warfare also pointed to this factor: "guerrilla movements depend on the attitude of the

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<sup>79</sup> Citation of Mao Ze Dong "The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea", [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the\\_guerrilla\\_must\\_move\\_amongst\\_the\\_people\\_as\\_a/216649.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_guerrilla_must_move_amongst_the_people_as_a/216649.html)

people in the area where the struggle takes place, on their willingness to aid it by providing information and supplies.”<sup>80</sup> A prime condition of success is that the enemy must be kept in the dark while the guerrilla operates in the light of superior local knowledge. A guerrilla movement needs this “mental light” to carry out security operations and surprise actions by night. As defended by David Galula<sup>81</sup>, if the insurgent manages to dissociate the population from the counterinsurgent, to control it physically, to get its active support, he will win the war because, in the final analysis, the exercise of political power depends on the tacit or explicit agreement of the population or, at worst, on its submissiveness. For both the Insurgent and the Counterinsurgent support of the population is necessary. Galula simplifies the situation by stating that in any situation, whatever the cause, “there will be an active minority for the cause, a neutral majority, and an active minority against the cause”<sup>82</sup>.

ISI’s 2010 document was already preconising that popular support was top-down and passed by the allegiance of tribal leaders since tribes are a resilient social structure for Sunni Arabs in Iraq. By controlling tribal leaders through its councils, the organisation will have better leverage on society in order to educate the population about the necessity to live under an Islamic State. It will have the upper hand in the information war on Sunnis’ “hearts and minds” by showing the Sunni population the real face of the ISI and counter its demonisation by mainstream media. Finally, these councils should raise the trust between ISI and the population by a steady process of power decentralisation. This decentralised administrative system gives broad authority to tribal leaders in administering and securing their respective regions, under the auspices of the ISI. As we will see in the last part, during the IS offensive of 2014, the group managed to enter villages and small towns peacefully after reaching an agreement with locals allowing them to patrol with their weapons in their areas (in Udhaym for example). These

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<sup>80</sup> Liddle Hart , *Strategy*, Meridian Book, 2nd edition 1967, p367

<sup>81</sup>David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1964, reprinted 2006

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

techniques of power echo Galula's advice of "relying on the favourable minority in order to rally the neutral majority and to neutralise or eliminate the hostile minority"<sup>83</sup>.

The other significant means preconized by ISI 2010 strategic document for gaining the Sunni's "hearts and minds" is the use of political and religious symbolism of sacrifice to the cause and "no concessions" to distance itself from other armed groups. Morally, the group has to show its exceptionalism by being morally superior to other groups in terms of its transparency and integrity. It also has to raise a local political leader from the people that will unite them such as the Mullah Omar for the Pashtu in Afghanistan. The strategic document concedes that the absence of a local unifying figure caused the infightings and quarrels between insurgents in the first years of the insurgency in Iraq. The rise of Abu Omar Baghdadi and the further Iraqiisation of the leadership was, according to the author, a precursor in anchoring the group in its social incubator, unlike what happened during the period under Zarqawi and even Al Muhajir, when it was perceived as an exogenous force. The document shows that in 2010 a few months after the death of its leaders and before the appointment of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the idea of further nationalising the group was germinating in the group's circles without the explicit consent of Al Qaeda Central. Religious symbolism is also important in the author's eyes concerning the relationship with the population. He states that the organisation needs to maintain its religious profile by promoting its independence and its self-fulfilment in the production of religious edicts (fatwa). This independence creates a solid bond with its citizens, like in Saudi Arabia, where the state's religious scholars are the people's religious reference. However, unlike in Saudi Arabia, the group's religious establishment needs to remain apart from the political power and be independent. The document considers that the population is important in order to isolate its rivals, as preconized by Galula that "victory is permanent isolation of the insurgent from

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<sup>83</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1964, reprinted 2006, p. 63



the population, isolation not enforced upon the population but maintained by and with the population”<sup>84</sup>.

In sum, ISI’s document released in 2010 provided a set of principles and guidelines that go beyond military affairs and the use of kinetic force. Through the concepts of “detering”, “targeting” and “cleansing” it adheres to a military strategy attacking the economy of the enemy, dislocating its psychological equilibrium by targeting its leaders and damaging the troops’ morale. The document is holistic by proposing a set of long-term actions to prepare ISI’s re-emergence from a social, economic, educational, religious and framing perspective. By inspiring itself with US counterinsurgency strategy shaped by General Petraeus in 2006, it confirms ISI’s awareness of its initial “alienness” to the Iraqi Sunni Arab society and the need to change this situation. It also confirms that the group can conceptualise a Strategy that goes beyond its kinetic activities; they cannot be limited to terrorism or insurgency and are permeable to exogenous concepts and ideas even from its enemies.

IS was a capable insurgent guerrilla force, a learning terrorist organisation and a proto-state that inspired its strategy from COIN and shifted between military and political phases. To grasp this multidimensional approach, insurgent based or COIN theories are not sufficient, and a more comprehensive and holistic theory is needed. For that reason, a closer correspondence and cross-fertilisation between terrorism studies, the study of insurgency and counter-insurgency can offer a more lucid conceptualisation of this group and a better understanding of its resurgence. Each scope can bring some clues, but the use of the Indirect approach as umbrella concept can provide us with a holistic understanding of IS resurgence and take into account its shapeshifting nature as a terror organisation, an insurgency and proto-state using military and conventional political means.

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<sup>84</sup> Galula, David. *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1964. P. 76

## 5-The Jihadi warfare and the indirect approach

Using the Indirect approach to assess IS' resurgence requires to verify the level of influence LH's had on Jihadi theorists. Before the emergence of the Islamic State, during the last two decades, Al Qaeda and jihadist theorists were prolific in elaborating strategies and theorising how jihad should be planned. Three modern figures emerged who produced a large corpus of texts that shaped jihadist strategies. First, Abu Mosab Al Suri for the post-9/11 period and as a retrospective critic of past failed insurgencies, Abu Bakr Naji after the 2003 US intervention in Iraq and Seif Al Adl for the revolutionary insurgent groups for the post-2011 Arab Spring.

In his book "The Call for a Global Jihad", Abu Musab Al Suri advocates leaderless resistance (lone wolf attacks) and discusses the issue of eschatology. The book also narrates Suri's experience in jihad enterprises, which ended in failures such as in Syria against Hafez Assad in the '80s or during the Algerian civil war in the '90s. It made him write a series of testimonies<sup>85</sup> and lessons learned from the mistakes that were committed. He enumerated the following lessons that he said should be applied to any jihadi uprising: to maintain a secret organisation even in times of success; to have a centralised strategy in a decentralised organisation; and to compartmentalise the organisation, avoid compromise and prefer quality over quantity in its recruitment process. IS adopted some elements from Abu Musab Al Suri's scriptures such as the inspiration of individual actions all around the world and the use of eschatology for propaganda. However, Al Qaeda and Jabhat Al Nusra led by Jolani are considered the real inheritors of Al Suri's methodology. Recently, IS' media disavowed Al Suri's vision and methodology for jihad, saying that it had no relation to their methodology<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>85</sup> Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad, the life of al Qaeda strategist Abu Musab al Suri*, Columbia University Press, 2008, p363

<sup>86</sup> Islamic State, Dabiq The Murtad Brotherhood , Issue (14), 2015, p42

Concerning the indirect approach's principles, Abu Bakr Naji's recommendations about space and dispersion of attacks mirror LH's notion of distribution and concentration when he considers that military effort should take the shape of "a disturbance in the balance between the conglomeration of the forces of the enemy and their dispersion"<sup>87</sup>. Liddle Hart considered that for the success of guerrillas, the ratio space to force was paramount. He illustrated this with Lawrence's calculation that the Ottoman army's requirement to control the area where they were stationed was of 600 000 men while they had only 100 000. Naji also asked to disperse enemy forces to focus on less guarded peripheries and push the enemy to concentrate its efforts on defending sensitive sites with its best elements from the security forces. He considered that the choice of the attack's location is paramount since it defines the enemy's reaction and if carefully chosen, can lead its troops to confusion<sup>88</sup>. This comes from the idea that when enemy forces are spread in large areas, they lose their efficiency. This vision finds an echo in military studies with Kenneth Boulding's notion of "Loss of Strength Gradient"<sup>89</sup>. According to him, the more battlefield and operation centres are far from centres, the more likely it is that they will lose strength. Naji, therefore, laments the fact that Islamist militant groups in Egypt never applied these principles. They concentrated their activities in the urban areas of the Delta region rather than dispersing their forces across Egypt, which made it easy for the Egyptian security forces to crush them. His recommendations, thus, are in line with LH's view of attacking the weakest point before concentrating on the centre and that psychological dislocation of an enemy combined with an indirect physical approach can reduce its will to fight.

For the post-Arab Spring context, Saif Al Adl (Mohammed Salah al-Din Zidan) emerged as a leading strategist figure in the jihadist literature. Being one of the

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<sup>87</sup> Abu Bakr Al Naji , *The management of savagery* , translated by William McCants John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies Harvard University, 2006, p28

<sup>88</sup> Liddle Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd revised edition Meridian, 1991, p366

<sup>89</sup> Kenneth E. Boulding, *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory*, New York: Harper. p. 262. (1962).

highest military strategists for Al Qaeda, he survived the War on Terror and was an important voucher of Zarqawi's entrance the organisation back in the '90s.<sup>90</sup> In 2003, with contacts from Iran, he coordinated the exfiltration of Zarqawi from Afghanistan to Iraq. This move was decided because of the opportunities he foresaw of an imminent US invasion due to the creation of an Islamic state in the Middle East. Nowadays, Zidan is the top military strategist for Al Qaeda in Yemen or Iran and someone who influenced Zarqawi. In his eulogy<sup>91</sup> published in 2007, he presented himself as the one behind the idea of creating a military camp led by Zarqawi in Herat to train fighters coming from the Levant, Iraq and Turkey. His detention in Iran after 9/11 offered him an opportunity to expose his criticism of revolutionary jihadi movements and theorise his political and military strategy in 2013, just before the split between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. The second part of his book, "The revolution and the winds of change" presents his strategic vision and military doctrine from his experience as an ex-member of the Egyptian Special Forces. In the chapter dedicated to his strategic vision, Zidan starts with an examination of the different definitions of that term, as determined by various researchers. Zidan quotes ancient military historians and strategists (such as Liddell Hart and Clausewitz) and discusses in detail the difference between a direct strategy, and strategies that follow an indirect approach. This volume deals with the subject of guerrilla warfare and begins by defining that concept and characterising the groups that engage in guerrilla warfare. He mentions Liddle Hart<sup>92</sup> multiple times and agrees with his definition of strategy, understood as "the

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<sup>90</sup> Al-Qa'ida Commander Writes Al-Zarqawi 'Jihadist Biography' August 17, 2009 Eulogy of Zarkawi by Seif El Adl, [https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/BE/BED1F9E8864FE5A2AEE1C121211887D4\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%A8\\_%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%81\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%84.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/BE/BED1F9E8864FE5A2AEE1C121211887D4_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%A8_%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%81_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%84.pdf)

<sup>91</sup> "The Jihadi Biography of Abu Mosab Al Zarqawi", Seid el Adl, [https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/BE/BED1F9E8864FE5A2AEE1C121211887D4\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%A8\\_%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%81\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%84.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/BE/BED1F9E8864FE5A2AEE1C121211887D4_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%A8_%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%81_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%84.pdf)

<sup>92</sup> 4 times exactly

use of all the possible resources to reach a general political objective”<sup>93</sup>. From his Islamic perspective, a strategy consists of engaging all the resources to achieve the goals of the Islamic message. It is achieved by correcting the doctrinal deviance of humanity, following Sharia, applying social justice between the people, and protecting them and their properties. He considers that LH’s approach states the fact that confrontation should be avoided if there is a possibility to use alternative political, diplomatic and economic means. His adherence to the psychological dimension of Hart’s theory makes him say that the real stake of the struggle is not solely military but psychological and spiritual.

He agrees with Liddle Hart by stating that the most successful strategy is to achieve goals by non-military means, in particular, using psychological means such as propaganda and predication, economic pressure and sedition in order to destroy the opponent’s morale. The best outcome would be the possibility to coerce the enemy without using the military option or by using minimum means. The armed struggle is, therefore just a part of the struggle and should be used carefully at the right moment and for the right reasons. War is not conceived as the “continuation of politics with other means” as defined by Clausewitz but as a tool among others designed to create a better environment for predication (*Dawa’a*). Behind an adherence to the indirect approach, especially against a stronger opponent, is the belief in the success of an alternative approach that avoids frontal confrontation and scatters the opponent’s forces like, as he compares, “the Toreros with the bull”<sup>94</sup>.

It is evident that Seif Al Adl is the Jihadi theorist who is more influenced by Liddle Hart’s principles and explicitly declares his adherence to the adoption of a Grand Strategy. He proclaims his belief in them and stresses their relevance for Mujahedeen groups. Al Adl’s influence can be observed in the discourse Al Qaeda’s branches in the world. Al Qaeda in the Arabic peninsula and its media

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<sup>93</sup> Seif al-Adel, *Struggle and Winds of Change – Revolution and Guerrilla Strategies*, Vol 2 ,2012, p182, <http://www.gulfup.com/?tdrolU>

<sup>94</sup> Ibid p218

wing *Al Malaheem* released between 2013 -2014 a compilation of six lectures<sup>95</sup> from its military academy. During his lecture, Nasser bin Ali al-Ansi a high-ranking leader of the group, emphasised the importance of the indirect approach. He espoused the idea that winning was not by killing a high number of fighters but by undermining their morale and will to fight. He stated that Al Qaeda could not adhere to the direct approach because of the asymmetrical balance of power. Violence, according to him, was not a goal *per se* but a way to send messages to the enemy and its audience. To illustrate this, he pointed to small operations that may not be lethal but can have more impact than deadly operations. He also shed light on two types of indirect approaches, one that can be physical by taking the enemy by surprise or the other which is morale related, by targeting its “nervous system”, showing its incompetence and undermining its legitimacy. As Al Ansi states during one of his lectures “victory come from the spirit of the leaders not the bodies of the soldiers”. For that purpose, he considers that guerrilla warfare is the most suitable strategy for the group because “you control and impose on the enemy the timing and location of the attack”.

As we have underlined from Seif Al Adl’s intellectual and strategic contribution, Al Naji’s guidelines and Al Ansi lectures, jihadi strategists from Al Qaeda realm are familiar with the indirect approach, LH’s Grand strategy principles and can even embrace them publicly. Because of the asymmetrical balance of power the group faced in its different battlefields, it is more prone to adhere to a strategical thought which emphasises the importance of immaterial factors such as psychological equilibrium. Despite being reluctant to follow non-Islamic thinkers, the universal dimension of the indirect approach and guerrilla warfare strategy made these strategists rely on these principles to adapt them to their Islamic value system and build their strategic model.

Multiple factors can explain the fact that Al Qaeda's strategists are more prone to espouse ideas coming from non-Islamic thinkers publicly. First, because of IS’ particularism and obsession with doctrinal purity, it will never publicly claim

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<sup>95</sup> Al Malaheem foundation presents the lesson 2: the importance of a Grand Strategy by sheikh Bin Ali Al Ansi, 2014, <https://archive.org/details/mmjh8yv>

to follow the principles of non-Islamic thinkers. The indirect approach and the guerrilla strategy in its broader sense, requires some pragmatism to avoid isolation and find a support zone. For that reason, in contrast to Al Qaeda, there is no mention in IS' discourse of Liddle Hart or any other military strategist. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the fact that the group can follow some of the strategic guidelines outlined by LH. The main reproach that IS' literature finds on guerrilla strategy is ideological, because of its dependence on popular support. IS' ideologues do not believe in popular support as a goal per se and consider it as a "Marxist idea espoused by Al Qaeda's strategists which delay full implantation of Sharia and permit alliances with other rebel groups"<sup>96</sup>. Recently the group published in its official newspaper in 2019 a series of guerrilla warfare guidelines to its troops showing the formulation of principles of the indirect approach.<sup>97</sup> Many principles presented revealed themselves to be in line with Liddle Hart strategic guidelines that are presented in the methodological part.

### *6-Liddle Hart's three-dimensional application of the indirect approach.*

For the reasons explained above, considering the group from just one angle can limit its understanding. The terrorist group scope is not relevant in Iraq since the times of Tawheed wal Jihad. As a traditional insurgency, it remains obsolete given the evolution of the insurgencies nowadays. Finally, considering it only as a proto-state using COIN methods is limited to only some experiences at a given time. Liddle Hart's theory that explains decisive victory encompasses all these manifestations and has been embraced by jihadi theorists. The power of Liddle Hart is its universal nature, flexibility and explanation of success in war using

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<sup>96</sup> Naba Newsletter issue 121 available at <https://jihadology.net/2018/03/01/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-121/>

<sup>97</sup> See for a translation Aymen Tamimi, Islamic State Insurgent Tactics: Translation and Analysis, Apr 26, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation>

strategy. This part's objective is to show that Liddle Hart indirect approach theory applies to guerrilla warfare, conventional warfare, with a political and a non-military dimension. Moreover, his thoughts have been influencing Jihadi thinkers and strategists during the last decades. Indeed, Jihadi warfare as we saw is familiar with Liddle Hart's principles of the indirect approach and has expressed its embracement of it. Its use as a theoretical framework to study IS' is not baseless but rather follows years of evolution of Jihadi warfare taught and broadening of its repertoire of inspiration since the '70s from Guerrilla warfare theorist to Western military historians.

Basil Liddle Hart was a British captain sent twice to the Western Front during WWI. His personal experience influenced the subsequent development of his military theories. Following the war, he focused his researches on infantry tactics, seeking to develop a general theory of strategy that counters the widespread following of Clausewitz's principles of war among the military commandment. He published a "Man in the Dark Formula" and "The Decisive Wars of History" in 1929. The main idea of both books was to articulate his tactical recommendations within the framework of a strategy of the indirect approach. He also theorised the use of armoured warfare as a way to strike a defensive stalemate, which characterised WW1 in a burgeoning version of what would be the blitzkrieg. After WW2, he updated his book and thesis by retitling it "The Strategy of the Indirect Approach". In 1967, he again published an updated edition, which constitutes the support base of this thesis. Liddle Hart referred to strategy as "the art of distributing military means to fulfil the end of a policy"<sup>98</sup> while a modern definition of the US Department of Defence considers it as "the level of war at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to achieve strategic objectives within theatres or other operational areas"<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>98</sup> Liddle Hart , *Strategy*, Meridian Books 2nd edition, 1967, p335

<sup>99</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, Department of Defense Military and Associated Terms (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 8 November 2010, as amended through 15 June 2015), 236, 299.



The study's theoretical framework is built to analyse the group's strategy for its military expansion. The selection of LH's theory as a research scope to assess IS' resurgence has to do first with its universal nature. The universality of this theory makes possible its application to almost any conflict. Indeed, he considered the human mind as a constant and the strategy it designs as a variable to win. He used the type of strategy used by military commanders as a variable for studying the outcome of a conflict. Even though people tend to believe there are many strategies and methods for victory, Hart's theory considers from its analysis of 2500 years of armed conflicts that unlike the general school of thought only one successful strategy exists for defeating the enemy, which is the indirect approach. His discovery of the indirect approach was the result of a systematic study of the whole history of war before concluding that: "throughout the ages, decisive results in war have only been reached when the approach has been indirect. In strategy, the longest way round is apt to be the shortest way home"<sup>100</sup>. Thus, two basic lessons emerged from the military theorist's definition of his approach: no direct attack should be launched upon an enemy firmly in position and dislocation should precede destruction.

This military theory publicised in the 1930s had an enduring relevance symbolised by its adoption until our days by a range of military actors. The US Army, for example, still follows its principles as is suggested by its Field Manual describing the offensive approach: "The ideal attack should resemble what Liddle Hart called the 'expanding torrent'. It should move fast, follow reconnaissance units or successful probes through gaps in enemy defences, and shift its strength quickly to widen penetrations and to reinforce its successes, thereby carrying the battle deep into the enemy rear"<sup>101</sup>.

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<sup>100</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. Toronto: Meridian, 1991, p5.

<sup>101</sup> US Department of the Army, Operations, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington: GPO, 1986), p. 109.

## Liddle Hart's vision for Guerrilla Warfare

Liddle Hart's guidelines of the indirect approach were considered by him as applicable by soldiers on the battlefield and by government's leaders. In other words, they were relevant to the tactical and strategic level<sup>102</sup>. Equally, he considered that "tactics lies in and fills the province of fighting"<sup>103</sup>. Tactics refer to the employment and arrangement of forces including arms, equipment, and personnel in battles or the immediate presence of the enemy. Clausewitz defines it as "the use of armed forces in the engagement, strategy the use of engagement for the object of the war"<sup>104</sup>. The US Department of Defence refers to tactics as "the level of war at which battles and engagements are planned and executed to achieve military objectives assigned to tactical units or task forces"<sup>105</sup>. Hart, when studying the Punic War and the Arab Revolt led by Lawrence of Arabia against the Ottomans at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, analysed and developed his concept of guerrilla warfare<sup>106</sup>. In both cases, irregular warfare took the shape of a war of attrition by avoiding confrontation against a more powerful enemy. Lawrence of Arabia describes well how his army of irregular Bedouin warriors should behave to defeat the Ottoman troops in the giant ocean of desert that constitutes the Arabian Peninsula<sup>107</sup>. It mirrors the state of IS during the period of its rebound after its defeat in 2010: it retreated to remote areas, did not hold terrain and waged guerrilla warfare mainly in the desert and rural environments. As stated by Lawrence, the war waged was to be "a war of detachment by not

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p321

<sup>103</sup> ibid

<sup>104</sup> C Von Clausewitz, *On War*, edition and translation M. Howard and P. Paret, Princeton 1976, p128

<sup>105</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, Department of Defence Military and Associated Terms (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 8 November 2010, as amended through 15 June 2015), 236, 299.

<sup>106</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. Toronto: Meridian, 1991, pp361-370

<sup>107</sup> "Armies were like plants, immobile as a whole, firm-rooted, nourished through long stems to the head. We might be vapour, blowing where we listed. Our kingdoms lay in each man's mind, and as we want nothing material to live on, so perhaps we offered nothing material to the killing." Liddle Hart, *Lawrence of Arabia*, Da Capo Press, Reprint edition, 1935, p172

engaging the enemy”<sup>108</sup>. Hart has raised the success of the Arab revolt as a perfect example for the validity of the indirect approach to irregular and asymmetrical warfare. The Arab tribes’ unbalanced ratio in material and human resources was counterbalanced by Bedouins’ capacity for mobility (speed and time). Lawrence’s guerrilla campaign used the smallest force in the quickest time at the farthest place while not executing pushes but strokes. Against an Ottoman army highly dependent on railways and their maintenance, Arab rebels implemented a strategy of material attrition of the enemy. For that purpose, to disarm was more potent than to kill in his theory of irregular warfare, while range was considered more important for strategy than force.

This strategy of avoiding confrontation embraced by Liddle Hart against a more powerful enemy takes its roots from the Punic Wars with the policy of refusing battles adopted by Roman General Fabian against Hannibal, the leader of Carthage. In military history, Fabian’s policy has been understood as an approach to military operations, avoiding massive battles and confrontation in favour of smaller actions designed to break the enemy’s psychological equilibrium. For the success of such a war policy, the time has to be on the side of its user, who needs to avoid large-scale actions against a larger foe. As defined by Hart, the Fabian approach was not an evasion of battle to gain time but a calculated decision to conduct raids and small-scale attacks to harass the morale of its enemy and wear down the invaders’ endurance. From Lawrence’s and Fabian’s tactical conducts, we can affirm that guerrilla warfare in its essence fits the tactical purposes of their strategies. For the case study, the imperative of non-confrontation to succeed in guerrilla warfare is a variable of our assessment of IS’ following of the indirect approach at the tactical level.

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<sup>108</sup> “Most wars are wars of contact, both forces striving to keep in touch to avoid tactical surprise. Our war should be a war of detachment: We were to contain the enemy by the silent treat of a vast unknown desert, not disclosing ourselves till the moment of the attack. This attack need to be nominal, directed not against his men, but against his material [...] we might turn the average into a rule, and at length we developed an unconscious habit of never engaging the enemy at all. This chimed with the numerical plea of never giving the enemy’s soldier a target.” Ibid p175

## **Grand Strategy, propaganda and COIN strategy.**

Even though Hart's model was for inter-state war, military strategists<sup>109</sup> have raised the idea of the indirect approach's compatibility with the 21<sup>st</sup> century's strategic stakes. With the emergence of non-state actors and the profusion of internal conflicts dominating the security landscape, the indirect approach has become fashionable. For the US it took the shape of a counter-insurgency campaign (COIN) in Iraq with the employment of surrogate forces against the Islamic State or the support for the Northern Alliance campaign by US Special Forces to topple the Taliban regime in 2001. For that reason, it made Thomas Henriksen think that the US' success to destroy the group in 2007-2010 was possible by following an indirect approach.<sup>110</sup> COINs are per se, based on a strategy following the indirect approach of using local auxiliary forces and winning "the hearts and minds" of the population by improving their economic conditions.

Scott Morrison identified Hart's indirect approach as a "method to orient upon, target, and upset an adversary's equilibrium to plan for and direct, decisive blows"<sup>111</sup>. LH defined strategy as "the practical adaptation of the means placed at a general's disposal to the attainment of the object in view"<sup>112</sup>. In contrast to the interpretations of Clausewitz about war and its inherent cost of blood, Liddell Hart argues that the "perfection of strategy would be to produce a decision without any serious fighting".<sup>113</sup> On a higher level, is Grand Strategy, as Hart refers to it when the aim is "to coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war."<sup>114</sup> His vision of

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<sup>109</sup> Thomas Henriksen, "Afghanistan, COIN, and the Indirect Approach", JSOU Report 10-3, April 2010, [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/jlhsou/coin\\_indirect\\_approach\\_apr2010.pdf](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/jlhsou/coin_indirect_approach_apr2010.pdf)

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> Morrison, Scott. "Redefining the Indirect Approach, Defining Special Operations Forces (SOF) Power, and the Global Networking of SOF.", *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 2 (2014): : 48-54, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.7.2.6>

<sup>112</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd rev. ed. Toronto: Meridian, 1991

<sup>113</sup> Ibid p338

<sup>114</sup> Ibid p321-22

the strategy is not limited to the movement of forces – as its role is often defined – but with the effect”<sup>115</sup>. Its does not reduce strategy to war and military manoeuvres but includes all possible other resources to attain war’s objectives. Grand Strategy equals a national policy guiding all aspects of social and economic activity towards the achievement of war. It can take the shape of applying financial and diplomatic pressure as well as moral pressure to cause the opponent’s will to weaken. By definition, it constitutes a holistic approach with long-term objectives comparable with the aims and methods of a COIN. This characteristic derives from Liddell Hart’s exhortation that Grand Strategy extends beyond the present war to plan for future peace. LH considered that Grand Strategy was inseparable from war since it is “practically synonymous with the policy which guides the conduct of war.”<sup>116</sup> This approach does not have a unique military dimension but also has a political one that can take multiple shapes. This characteristic derives from Liddell Hart’s exhortation that Grand Strategy extends beyond the present war to plan for future peace. It is also holistic in the sense of being concerned with all the resources at the state’s disposal.

The existing literature almost exclusively tackles the subject by referring to superpowers rather than smaller or proto-states. As a result, the concept of Grand Strategy is very often linked to the United States of America’s strategy. For one reason, this can be explained by the critical impact great powers have on the international system as well as their global ambitions. However, the definition of the concept by Liddle Hart does not narrow down its use exclusively to superpowers. Small states or political entities aspiring to become one can elaborate grand plans in which they theorise and prioritise the use of their resources in order to attain their long-term objectives. Size and means do not determine a strategy rather than the type of resources involved.

This thesis follows other academic studies using the framing theory to explain the success of IS as a social movement. According to Andersen and Sandberg study

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid p335

<sup>116</sup> Ibid

of IS' international propaganda, its diagnostic framing presents "concrete problems such as identifying enemies, the unjust treatment of Muslims, and Western values and practices that demand immediate change."<sup>117</sup> They add that "collective action framing further provides solutions in prognostic frames such as the construction of the Caliphate, jihad, emigrations, and the implementation of sharia"<sup>118</sup>. IS' success depends on the organisation's "ability to promote specific version of reality and to make this version resonate with the worldview of potential recruits."<sup>119</sup> The majority of the studies and research papers on IS propaganda are more focused on its global message since 2014 with a particular interest on its international productions like Dabiq magazine, *Al Itissam* foundation and the infamous *Flames of War* movie which have been decorticated and analysed under different prisms<sup>120</sup>.

Regarding IS propaganda towards its Iraqi audience, there are very few research papers. Kirk H. Sowell focused his attention on the Islamic State's eastern Anbar propaganda efforts. According to him, they have been successful, in part because of IS' perception of its target audience, but even more, because mainstream "Arabic-language media have either consciously or subconsciously amplified their message in a way to make it credible within the Sunni Arab world"<sup>121</sup>. According to him, the treatment of the regional press made that "a substantial

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<sup>117</sup> Jan Christoffer Andersen & Sveinung Sandberg (2018): *Islamic State Propaganda: Between Social Movement Framing and Subcultural Provocation, Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2018.1484356

<sup>118</sup> Ibid p6

<sup>119</sup> Jan Christoffer Andersen & Sveinung Sandberg (2018): *Islamic State Propaganda: Between Social Movement Framing and Subcultural Provocation, Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2018.1484356

<sup>120</sup> See Samantha Mahood & Halim Rane (2017) *Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda*, *The Journal of International Communication*, 23:1, 15-35, and Vivek Venkatesh, Jeffrey S. Podoshen, Jason Wallin, Jihan Rabah & Daniel Glass (2018): *Promoting Extreme Violence: Visual and Narrative Analysis of Select Ultraviolent Terror Propaganda Videos Produced by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2015 and 2016*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2018.1516209 10.1080/13216597.2016.1263231

<sup>121</sup> Sowell, Kirk H. "The Islamic State's Eastern Frontier: Ramadi and Fallujah as Theaters of Sectarian Conflict." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 130-41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26297421>.

segment of the population which does not hold to IS' core ideology but believes that working with it against the government makes sense, or that at least accepting it is no worse than the government."<sup>122</sup>The argument that Arab media outlets played a significant role in the ability of the Islamic State to propagandise itself in time is valid in term propagation of the message, but it does not explain the change of posture of the population toward IS. It can be considered as an amplifier but not as a root cause to explain IS mobilisation.

## III-Methodology

### *1 Ontology and epistemology of the thesis*

This section represents the ontology and epistemology of the thesis. It presents how this thesis will study IS' strategy. This research is a qualitative one even though the first part can appear to be quantitative. Indeed, this first part on IS claimed operations is based not on an absolute truth that we can observe in the real world and accept or reject but on IS' claims of activity diffused by its newspaper and taken as such. Because we are testing the adherence of IS military doctrine to LH's strategy, the ontology of the thesis is based on the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors in reality. In other words, the world around in which social actors engage is formed by socially constructed events. The qualitative methodology seeks to understand the reasons behind particular human behaviour. In this research, I use non-numerical textual or descriptive data; thus, answering the "how" and 'why' question of the research question. This research is taking the point of view of the actor that cannot be explained entirely through analysing numerical data. This mixed-method is combining quantitative and qualitative methods sequentially (See Chart 1). In part one, I use an explanatory sequential mixed method where I collect quantitative data in the first phase, analyse the results, and then use them to build on the

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid

qualitative phase. In the mixed method in the tactical part of the study, I observe quantitative data to test a hypothesis which is qualitative to infer or not the shift in the strategy of the group. The quantitative phase will be based primarily on outlier cases that serve the general qualitative method of the research. There is a need to understand better IS' strategy from its point of view, in the impossibility to access primary sources with a groundwork, the use of the group's claims of activity quantitatively can counterbalance this initial lack.



**Chart 1 presenting the Thesis' methodological framework**

The epistemology of this thesis is based on the very limits of the art of war and the issue of knowledge in military doctrine. Military doctrine is a traditional belief about what works in war and military operations. War is dependent on an incalculable number of fact form the most brute to the most sophisticated ones. Many of the facts cannot be treated in this study as it is the case for all military analyses and doctrines (state of the material, quality of the weapons, fuel used for the vehicles, events not reported by any parties...). For example, we do not



know the routes taken by attackers in Samarra and Mosul raids, the non-expected events that took place, psychological and material factors that could have impacted the operations. One of the limits of our study is that we do not know if the axioms presented by Liddle Hart were followed on purpose or not by IS commanders. The other epistemology has to do with LH's theory itself that applies to every military theory or doctrine. The study considers that the fruits of the human mind activity are not possible to be categorised since they are engaged in the process of continuous creation. We must take into account that war is an interaction of more than one actor which can adapt and influence themselves. In social science, there is the reflexivity of the object of scrutiny that is absent in sciences physics called "the influence of the prediction upon the predicted event"<sup>123</sup>. As defended by Edward Luttwak reflexivity is a part of a strategy where "a paradoxical logic of its own pervades the entire realm of strategy"<sup>124</sup>. Reflexivity is the *sine qua non*-strategy whose task is to anticipate what enemy will anticipate that you will anticipate *ad infinitum*<sup>125</sup>. In other words, during the research, the object of the study can adapt and change. If we can observe the following of the indirect approach in a case study, we cannot know the reasons behind it, if it was on purpose or by coincidence. This observation cannot grasp all the complexities of war which is intrinsic to its essence since the most important protagonists in war are humans. In every successful campaign, commanders can apply the universal principles of surprise, concealment or psychological warfare without formally applying a military doctrine.

Lastly, the other epistemology of this research investigation takes its roots in the possible causal relationship between the following of LH's axioms and IS resurgence by stating that, because IS followed LH's it resurged. Since LH's axioms are not provable, this possible causal relationship has to be nuanced

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<sup>123</sup> Harald Høiback, *Understanding Military Doctrine: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Cass Military Studies,) Taylor and Francis, 2013 P59

<sup>124</sup> Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The logical of war and peace*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, p4

<sup>125</sup> Harald Høiback, *Understanding Military Doctrine: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Cass Military Studies,) Taylor and Francis, 2013, p59

because a military theory is not an exact science. As stated by Naylor, “we must never imagine that we can induce infallible rule nor reduce war to an exact science”. In 1958, Toulmin claimed in “The Uses of Argument”<sup>126</sup>, that not all argument was reducible to logic. He offered an alternative to the material or formal conditional; he envisaged a different inference principle, which he called a warrant. He insisted that warrants, rather than being abstractions like conditionals, were bounded by institutional and disciplinary constraints, contextual boundaries he called fields. In military discourse, since no truth are possible, as explained by Harold Høiback, a rational discussion is possible only to the extent that there are interpersonal warrants. Hence, Liddle Hart presented what Høiback called “axiomatic foundationalism”<sup>127</sup>, defined as a qualitative deductive doctrine where military theory is inferred from a higher truth.

Although it can be based on something evidentially true, there is no proof that the adherence to principles of war does guarantee victory. For that reason, it cannot be proved unless by the prerequisite acceptance of what Toulmain calls data. For him, a claim or a conclusion is based on a range of data and on a warrant which authorises the sort of step taken to get from a claim A to a conclusion B (See Chart 3). LH’s axioms are not true or false in a meaningful sense. However, they can be backed by data. For that reason to say that IS resurgence is due to the following of the LH’s axioms is not possible. It is a part of the epistemology because it would have to prove them, which is not possible unequivocally. For example, the claim that surprise has been important for victory in the past can be presumably either true or false but it is backed by a countless amount of observations in the past that surprise was a factor to explain military victories. To consider that IS’ victories were due to the following of LH’s axiom on achieving psychological surprise and establish a direct causal relation, we will have to accept it first as a warrant as defined by Toulmin. For that reason, Liddle Hart’s theory does not pretend to be understood as a fail-proof formula for success (it is

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<sup>126</sup> William Keith and David Beard , Toulmin's Rhetorical Logic: What's the Warrant for Warrants?, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2008), pp. 22-50

<sup>127</sup> Harald Høiback, *Understanding Military Doctrine: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Cass Military Studies,) Taylor and Francis,2013, p59

impossible that any military historian will ever achieve one). Instead, it has to be taken as a working knowledge of a broad range of principles that can be used across space and time and are related to each other.



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**Chart 2 Toulmin's model of an Argument**

### **Sample selection**

To assess IS' resurgence from the Liddle Hart perspective, I use a three-dimensional perspective which corresponds to the tactics, strategy, and Grand Strategy. These three levels of analysis provide LH's principles with sufficient scope to unfold on the analytical canvas of the study. I have chosen the angle of the provincial division to study the group's military operations in Iraq. Because it follows the group's structuration and decentralisation process, this choice is not casual. It offers the possibility to shed light on the differences and similarities between each province. It also allows an explanation of the group's diverse performances and capacity to rebound depending on the region where it operates.

Expanding the study to Syria would have added too many new variables to continue with this particular investigation confidently and would be too vast to cover. For that reason, I focused on Iraq and selected the following five Iraqi

*wilayas*<sup>128</sup>, each one having its specificities: Baghdad, Anbar, Diyala, Salahudeen and Northern Baghdad and Nineveh. The choice of these provinces is not random but follows the group's quest for survival. It also supports the way the group has imagined itself in Iraq and its various strongholds throughout its short history. At the announcement of the Islamic State in Iraq in 2006, its leaders adopted a provincial division of the country. Studies regarding the group's structural organisation have proved that it has shaped itself according to this division. Throughout its quest for survival and growth in Iraq from 2003 to 2015, the IS in its different forms has shown to be a very fluid actor capable of retreating from one province to another and building safe heavens there. Despite each province having different landscapes and unique contexts affecting IS, they share the fact that they all hosted the group's centre of command in its different forms. Indeed, Tawheed Wal Jihad was first based in Baghdad, later it moved to Anbar as AQL, and after the 2006 battle of Ramadi, it retreated to Diyala province. After the 2007 surge and the anti-insurgency campaign, Islamic State in Iraq's (ISI's) centre of command fled north towards Salahudeen and finally established its centre of gravity in Nineveh in 2008.

The second reason behind the selection of five provinces out of seven, where the group operates in Iraq is because of the significant number of Arab Sunnis, which is the targeted population for IS' frames. I did not incorporate into the study the two other provinces which the group claimed to be part of its State in Iraq and which are labelled as the South Province and the Kirkuk Province. Regarding Kirkuk, the study focuses on the group's policy towards the Sunni Arab population, while Kurds mostly inhabit the region. However, because the Arab city of Hawijah was considered as a focal point for the 2013 protests, the city and its tribes are included in the study. The southern province is an area too vast encompassing all the territory south of Baghdad to Basra and is mostly inhabited by Shia Iraqis, except for the southern belt of Baghdad and the city of Babel. It never constituted a place where the group tried to achieve territorial control.

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<sup>128</sup> Arabic translation for governorates

**Hypothesis:** IS' resurgence adhered to LH's indirect approach principles at the tactical, strategic and Grand Strategy levels.

The study's central hypothesis is to test the group's application of the precepts of LH's indirect approach at tactical (with the notion of non-confrontation), strategic and grand strategy level according to the principles defended in Hart's axioms. To answer the research question from different angles, testing this hypothesis means building up a qualitative framework to understand IS' strategy. This framework is explained in the above methodology. First, the methodology for IS tactical adherence to the principle of non-confrontation while waging Guerrilla warfare is presented. In this part, I assess the moment IS began to shift its strategy by observing the evolution of the ratio of confrontational operations in the selected sample provinces (mixed methodology). More notably, in the next part, I verify its adherence to the indirect approach while manoeuvring at a strategic level during its prison break and urban assaults operations. (Qualitative methodology) Finally, its adherence to the indirect approach in its Grands Strategy is verified by observing the resonance of its propaganda with grievances expressed by the Sunni Arabs during the 2013 Iraqi Spring movement and its interactions and political behaviour with competitive social structures such as tribes and armed groups of the Sunni Arab insurgency. (Qualitative methodology)

## **2-Methodology on strategical shifts**

With respect to the subject of strategy, we shall point out first that strategy is not exclusive to state actors and can be a tool used by non-state actors such as terrorist organisations or insurgent groups. Contrary to the pre-conceived idea that conflates insurgent strategy and guerrilla warfare, insurgent movements have more options on the table that are not mutually exclusive. Seth Jones' research<sup>129</sup> on insurgent movements of the twentieth century confirms this by presenting three different options with strategic and tactical implications insurgents can choose to follow: guerrilla warfare, conventional warfare and

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid

punishment.<sup>130</sup> The choice of either of these strategies is determined by elements such as the balance of power, the level of territorial control and the existence of international backers. Guerrilla warfare consists of the use of military and political resources in order to mobilise the population, conduct hit and run attacks ( not facing the enemy) and undermine the opponent's will to fight. The primary goal is not to destroy a stronger enemy, but to undermine its morale by exhausting him, causing lethargy and defections among its ranks. As described by Ivan Arreguín-Toft, guerrilla warfare includes “the loss of soldiers, supplies, infrastructure, peace of mind, and most important, time”<sup>131</sup>. This strategy is a long-term one that requires patience and resilience.

The second option for an insurgent group is what is called “Punishment” and involves targeting civilians. Winning is not achieved by defeating governmental forces or breaking the morale of its troops only but also by undermining the morale of its population. Punishment deters a population from collaborating with and supporting the government and undermines their confidence in the state by showing that it cannot protect them. It can be driven by ideological reasons, which resonates perfectly with IS' clear-cut religious, ideological position to legitimate the targeting of civilians such as apostates in the case of the Shia community as a whole.

Finally, the conventional strategy involves the use of heavy weaponry in order to capture or destroy the opponent's armed forces as well as its population, territory or natural resources. The goal is to destroy the opponent's physical capacity to resist by defeating its security forces rather than winning over the population or breaking the enemy's morale. This strategy represents the final step before a total victory. For the case study, it refers to the period of the summer of 2014 when IS used a conventional strategy in its military campaign to seize territory in western and northern Iraq.

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<sup>130</sup> Seth G Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2017, p37

<sup>131</sup>Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars : A theory of asymmetric conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p103

For the military and strategic part of the study, I build a research framework based on the Guerrilla warfare theory as taught and developed by major military theorists throughout history. Insurgent theorists such as Mao, Laurence of Arabia, counter-insurgency models developed by the Rand corporation Daniel Byman, David Galula, or even Jihadi theorists writings on the subject by Abu Mosab Al Suri or Seif El Adl. All of them share as a common ground, the idea that the lifespan of a successful insurgency follows multiple phases.

As I argued in the section dedicated to the theoretical framework, guerrilla warfare is by its methods non-confrontational.<sup>132</sup>This understanding of non-confrontational operations derives from LH's adherence to the type of warfare waged by Lawrence of Arabia following the three guidelines he established: "Firstly that irregulars would not attack places, and so remained incapable of forcing a decision. Secondly, that they were as unable to defend a line or point as they were to attack it. Thirdly, that their virtue lies in-depth, not in the face."<sup>133</sup> Indeed, following this strategy, most of the military operations need to avoid contact and confrontation with the enemy. As described by Galula, the initial asymmetry in the revolutionary war is logic and forces the insurgent to "carry the fight to a different ground where he has a better chance to balance the physical odds against him".<sup>134</sup>This recommendation is repeated by Robert Taber in his book "War of the flea" when he states that given their inferiority of resources, guerrillas can survive only by avoiding confrontation with a superior enemy<sup>135</sup>. Applied to LH's approach, the guerrilla warfare strategy can succeed and change its tactics from indirect confrontation to confrontation only when the physical and moral equilibrium of the regular force is dislocated. As Mao stated, "Attack dispersed, isolated enemy forces first; attack concentrated strong enemy forces

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<sup>132</sup>John J McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary Warfare*, Faber, 1966, p260

<sup>133</sup> T.E Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, A Triumph, 1926, p. 224.

<sup>134</sup> Galula, David. *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1964.

<sup>135</sup> Robert Taber, *War of the Flea A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice*, Potomac Books; Reprint edition (August 1, 2002), 1968, p46

later"<sup>136</sup>. Otherwise, this shift of strategy is risky and can be disastrous if it is premature such as the North Vietnamese's ruinous confrontation with US regular forces during the 1968 Tet Offensive. For IS' experience, we could think of the urban assault on Kobane in the fall of 2014, where scores of its fighters were decimated by coalition airpower. Other urban assaults failed such as the attack of the Sinai branch against the city of Arish in July 2015 and the never officially claimed failed urban assault on the Southern Tunisian city of Ben Guerdan in March 2016. Galula writings emphasise the problem of timing. According to him, if premature, the evolution from a guerrilla to a regular army may lead to disaster. It needs to take places when "bases have been liberated and the enemy discouraged from invading them too frequently, and until the problem of armament is likely to be solved."<sup>137</sup>

The other famous strategist in the jihadi realm, Abu Mosab Al Suri, produced an extensive intellectual work on guerrilla warfare as part of his introspective study on the jihadi movement from 1960 to 2001. In his lectures<sup>138</sup> recorded in Khost in 1998 of the book "The War of the Flea: A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice",<sup>139</sup> he presented and embraced many ideas developed by the author, Robert Taber. He agreed with him by stating that Guerrilla warfare was not exclusively Marxist, many of its principles being universals<sup>140</sup>. He recognised that popular support and mastering of the terrain were two critical variables for the success of a guerrilla. Taber makes an analogy between the flea and the damage it can do to a dog and what a guerrilla can inflict to a conventional army. As he states the conventional army can be defeated after addition of little victories as the dog can die from a plague of the flea as he becomes "too weakened- in

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<sup>136</sup> Mao, Selected Military 41 of Mao Tse-tung , 2d ed., Pp. 332-333.

<sup>137</sup> David Galula, Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice (1964)

<sup>138</sup> Abu Musab Al Suri, *The management of guerrilla warfare*, 1998 [https://archive.org/details/7rb\\_3esabat\\_abo\\_mosab](https://archive.org/details/7rb_3esabat_abo_mosab)

<sup>139</sup> Robert Taber, *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare*, (first published 1965), Potomac Books, August 1st 2002

<sup>140</sup> Ibid p27



military terms, over-extended; in political terms, too unpopular; in economic terms, too expensive - to defend himself"<sup>141</sup>.

More recently, the idea of shifting between its strategic and tactical options finds an echo in jihadi strategic thought with the exhaustive intellectual contribution of Saif al- Adl. His tactical guidelines, published in 2013 in three volumes under the title "The winds of change"<sup>142</sup>, are much more detailed than Abu Bakr Al Naji's writings on military tactics. He describes step-by-step the different phases and modus operandi armed groups need to undertake to achieve victory, in the context of the post Arab Spring rise of rebel movements in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya. From a tactical angle, he considers that indirect strategy is an attrition war using guerrilla tactics in order to break the opponent's morale. It takes shape also by diverting the enemy's attention or opening secondary fronts in the territory of the enemy and its allies.

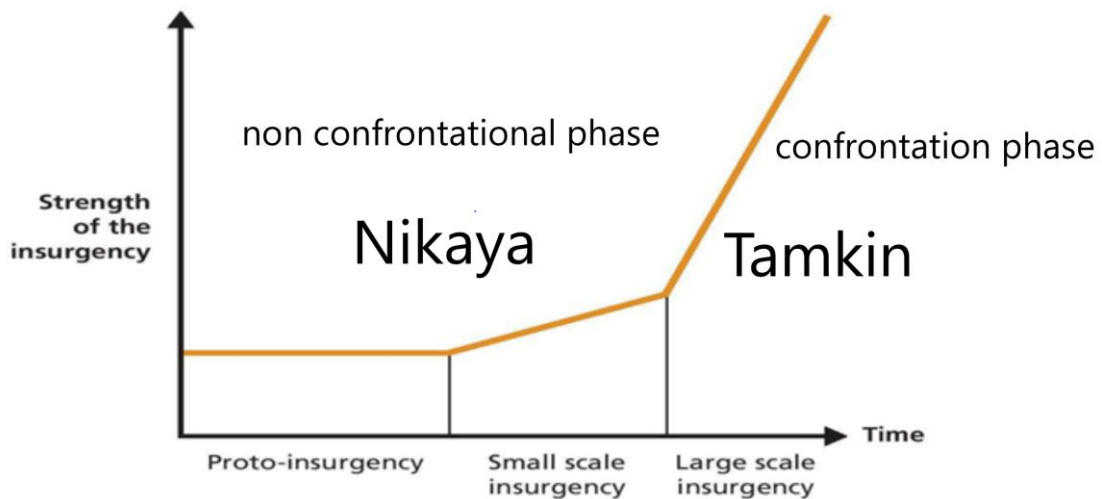
The research design of this project is based on two assumptions driven by insurgency theories.

- The support of the population is paramount for an insurgency and can be achieved through propaganda. This assumption will give us the possibility to use the frame dimension to assess the resonance of IS frames.
- The shift from guerrilla to conventional can be successful when it happens at the right moment after reaching some prerequisites.

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<sup>141</sup> Robert Taber, *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare*, (first published 1965), Potomac Books, August 1st 2002, p27

<sup>142</sup> Saif al-Adel, "Struggle and Winds of Change" – Revolution and Guerrilla Strategies, 2012 link : <http://www.gulfup.com/?tdrou>



**Chart 2 illustrating the evolution in time of the scale of an insurgency with regards to its strength.**

This chart represents the Lifespan of Insurgencies as taught by classic jihadi Strategists and identifies three phases of insurgency where proto-insurgents create a politically relevant identity filled by popular grievances that inspire individuals to join a revolt against the government. McCuen described the four phases of revolutionary warfare: organisation, terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and mobile warfare.<sup>143</sup> Mao has emphasised that this phase of organisation and preparation of base areas, usually takes place in an isolated and challenging terrain. During this period, the armed group needs to avoid direct concentrated confrontation with enemy forces because it can have harmful and counterproductive effects. Each phase of guerrilla warfare determines the use of weapons by insurgents. Here it consists of a stage of small guerrilla and limited terrorist warfare. Small raids, ambushes and assassinations are carried out using primitive weapons, light and medium machines, IEDs and grenades. The second stage of small-scale insurgency is a phase when the group can conduct limited attacks both terrorist ones and guerrilla ones. Here, the guerrillas move to more complex and strategic operations — progressive expansion by terror and attacks on isolated enemy units to obtain arms, supplies and political support. The second stage is called a phase of equilibrium. Open confrontation is not reached

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<sup>143</sup> John J McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary Warfare*, Faber, 1966, 40.

yet and raids and ambushes continue to be the basis of the operations, but they expand. The guerrillas can control some territories but without consolidating them. Medium and heavy weaponry, artillery and specialised units in explosives and mines are then deployed.

For Al Naji, Al Suri or Seif Al Adl, these two first phases are considered as one phase called “Nikaya phase”, the “exhaustion” phase. Regarding its tactical and military guidelines, Abu Bakr Al Naji’s vision is influenced by the failures and bitter experiences of the Islamist group in their asymmetrical warfare against the Egyptian state between the ’70s and ’90s. As a result, his recommendation was primarily destined for outnumbered and outgunned groups. His tactical recommendation during the “exhaustion” phase is to attack the enemy’s periphery with small battles and conduct ambushes by small groups following a guerrilla strategy (as an example, he stressed the critical role played by small Islamic factions in fighting the Crusaders by harassing them). In the current context, he envisions a global war against the “*Tawagheets*” states where the diversification and the expansion of terrorist attacks in quality and quantity and the targeting of their economy will overextend their resources. He also recommends evolving from simple operations to those that are more complex.

Seif el-Adl identifies two phases in the confrontation that determines the strategy and tactics to adopt.<sup>144</sup> During the first defensive asymmetrical phase, the armed group focuses on small and under-protected targets in order to secure rapid victories and attract recruits that will gain experience. He shares Abu Bakr Al Naji’s recommendation of starting small, using deception by attracting the enemy forces in multiple parts to scatter them. He also pinpoints the fact that “Hit and run” tactics are very efficient in order to avoid the enemy’s response. Attacks must be dispersed in vast areas, and the place of the attack should be carefully chosen in order to permit a quick and safe retreat. They should be used with parsimony only for high profile targets. During this period, the armed group needs to avoid direct concentrated confrontation with enemy forces because it can have

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<sup>144</sup> Saif al-Adel, “*Struggle and Winds of Change*” – *Revolution and Guerrilla Strategies*, 2012 link : <http://www.gulfup.com/?tdrou>

harmful and counterproductive effects. This asymmetrical phase is a war of attrition destroying the enemy's morale and economy.

The contribution of Al Suri was his linking of the weapons of insurgents used for each phase of the guerrilla warfare<sup>145</sup>. The first one is called exhaustion, "*Nikaya*" as used by Al Naji. It consists of a stage of small guerrilla and limited terrorist warfare where small raids, ambushes and assassinations are carried out using primitive weapons, light and medium machines, IEDs and grenades. The second stage is called a phase of equilibrium. Here, the guerrillas move to more complex and strategic operations. Open confrontation is not reached yet, and raids and ambushes continue to be the basis of the operations, but they expand. The guerrillas can control some territories but without consolidating them. Medium and heavy weaponry, artillery and specialised units in explosives and mines are then deployed. As defended by him<sup>146</sup>, an open confrontation at the wrong time in a permanent position is one of the guerrillas' most vulnerable spots. He argues that opposing an opponent with incredible and incomparable abilities and technological superiority in an overt way remains catastrophic at the wrong time.

In the third stage called large scale insurgency, insurgents have established physical control over various parts of the country. Mao refers to it as the decision phase with confrontation and destruction of the enemy in the battlefield. Before confronting the government forces and their allies, there is a sensitive issue of timing. If premature, the creation of a regular army, which necessarily is less elusive than guerrilla gangs, may lead to disaster. Indeed, following this strategy, most of the military operations need to avoid contact and confrontation with the enemy. The last phase is the one when guerrilla type armed groups convert themselves into conventional armies. "Hit and run" tactics are replaced by a comprehensive strategy to conquer cities using progressive blockades (cut off supply lines and sieges of cities, military bases and airports). The guerrillas use

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<sup>145</sup> Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad, the life of al Qaeda strategist Abu Musab al Suri*, Columbia University Press, 2008, p471

<sup>146</sup> Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad, the life of al Qaeda strategist Abu Musab al Suri*, Columbia University Press, 2008, p373

regular and semi-regular forces and have the ability to control some areas they can use to project their forces. Seif el Adl described this phase that takes place when the enemy has retreated from remote areas and the countryside at the expense of armed groups. Armed groups can, therefore, operate in large areas after having acquired experience, military material and recruits. Having a permanent base, they can use new supply routes or build new ones with engines and tractors. These new routes have an essential effect in surprising the enemy. The surprise effect remains in the army's ability in choosing the time, place, nature and intensity of the military operation. For Al Suri, the third stage is the final one and is called the "liberation stage". The guerrillas use regular and semi-regular forces and have the ability to control some areas they can use to project their forces. They can receive the support of the regular army's units who deserted from the army. They have acquired sufficient tactical knowledge and level of armament to confront the enemy in open battle. Small guerrilla units still play a role in fomenting operations behind enemy lines in order to confuse it.

### **3-Methodology for a tactical analysis of IS' operations through LH's scope.**

#### **The use of the confrontational nature of the operation as a variable.**

Because IS' decisive victory over the Iraqi Army cannot be limited to the analysis of the battle of Mosul or the urban 2014 offensive, this section of the study consists of analysing from a quantitative perspective the operations claimed from 2012. This will give the opportunity to study the shift of strategies from a provincial perspective. As stated by Liddle Hart, and especially in irregular warfare, "the success of a decision depends on the success of the preliminary distraction"<sup>147</sup>. He adds, "Distraction is far more than half of the battle, nine-tenths would be nearer the mark"<sup>148</sup>. Since no major battle or conquest took place in Iraq during the two years preceding the 2014 urban offensive, we can consider that

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<sup>147</sup> Liddle Hart , *Lawrence of Arabia* , Da Capo Press; Reprint edition 1935, p441

<sup>148</sup> Ibid p254

the sum of hundreds of security and military operations carried out by the group were part of this “preliminary distraction”.

Most of the studies on IS’ operations have usually chosen to classify IS’ attacks from a support/attack zone perspective where the targets and modus operandi vary depending on each zone. Both investigations conducted by Alex Bilger<sup>149</sup> on ISIS’ military annual reports and Jessica Lewis’ on ISIS’ VBIEDs waves<sup>150</sup> have adopted this categorisation. Zones of support are areas where the group benefit from substantial popular support as a prelude to the control of terrain. Hence, there are more targeted operations that need freedom of manoeuvring to take place: IEDs, assassinations, targeted attacks and the establishment of checkpoints. From the pattern attacks of the provinces of Nineveh, Anbar and Diyala, these studies came to the same conclusion that in specific zones of those provinces the group had established support zones. In other areas, called “attack zones”, more operations that were devastating took place using SVBIEDs and VBIEDs and targeting civilians. This study adopts a new perspective to focus not on the target or place where the attack took place, but rather by focusing on the nature of the operation, more precisely its confrontational dimension.

The objective of this part of the research on IS’ tactics is to adopt a provincial quantitative comparison of the volume of “confrontational” and “non-confrontational” operations claimed by the group and their evolution between the end of 2011 and mid-2014. The operations claimed by the group were categorised between those that are by essence confrontational and those that avoid confrontation. At the tactical level, confrontation or not with the enemy in operation represents the dependent variable of study while the independent variable is the province selected.

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<sup>149</sup> Alex Bilger, “ISIS annual reports reveal a metrics-driven military command”, Institute for the Study of War, May 2014, <http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ISIS-Annual-Reports-Reveal-Military-Organization>

<sup>150</sup> Jessica D Lewis, “Al Qaeda in Iraq is resurgent”, Middle East Security Report 14, September 2013, [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf)

The purpose of this mixed methodology is to determine which kind of operation the group has claimed the most in Iraq in the two years before its successful urban assaults of 2014. It will give us the ability to test the first hypothesis of the study on IS' adherence to LH's principles of non-confrontation while waging a guerrilla strategy. It may give an insight into which kind of tactic the group preferred to adopt in its campaign against the ISF and which provinces were ready for the 2014 shift from insurgency to conventional warfare. The investigation's result could also say more about the group's tactical patterns in Iraq from a provincial perspective. The study of the variables like the attacks claimed by the group may also help to point out when the shift to direct confrontation was possible and how it preceded the start of the conventional warfare campaign.

### **Categorisation of the operations**

Before turning to an analysis of IS' military operational claims through the scope of LH's theory, it is important first to examine how the annual reports are organised and which methodology the investigation follows to categorise the military operations of the group. The group's reports on its annual operations contain two essential features: attack types and the operating area where they are organised. Those two variables, the nature of the operation and its geography, fit the framework of research of the study. The attacks were reported and classified across seven geographical areas of Iraq: Nineveh, Anbar, Diyala, South, Kirkuk, Salahudeen and Northern Baghdad and Baghdad. Following the selected sample of the investigation, I selected five provinces: Salahudeen and Northern Baghdad (SNB), Baghdad, Nineveh, Anbar and Diyala. Operations were classified according to their type. From the range of operations listed above, they have been classified according to their confrontational nature. Confrontational or non-confrontational operations generally differ in terms of cells involved, resources engaged, damages inflicted and targets. These characteristics are not clear-cut, and exceptions can be found for both cases. (See table 1)

NATO defines indirect fire as "Fire delivered at a target which cannot be seen by the aimer"<sup>151</sup>. In the military realm, indirect fire is generally associated with field artillery and mortars. These combat operations possess the following attributes: the gunner has a covered position and can flee the operation zone. The target is usually in movement while taken by surprise. For insurgents, these kinds of operations can be useful, especially for guerrilla-type warfare, by using indirect-fire weapons such as mortars, rockets or explosive devices. In IS' structure and jargon the teams involved in these operations are usually the Security cells (*Mafariz Amniya*), the explosive device cells (*Mafariz O'bowat*), the sniper cells (*Mafariz al Qanasat*), the air defence cells, (*Mafariz Difaa' jawi*) and the support cells (*Mafariz Isnad*). Non-confrontational operations do not need many resources and cause limited damage even though their repetition can break the psychological equilibrium of the enemy. As indicated by its name, confrontational operations are conducted directly on the battlefield in order to inflict damage to the enemy. The attacker is facing the enemy at close range. He is engaged in direct fire and exposes himself to return fire from the target. Incursion cells (*Mafariz al iktiham*), Martyrdom cells (*Mafariz Istishhadyine*) and Military cells (*Mafariz A'askariya*) are generally involved in these operations. The human and financial cost for these operations is usually higher for confrontational operations which are more likely to cause devastating damages (except for hand grenades).

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<sup>151</sup> AAP-6 NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions



	Confrontational operations	Non-confrontational operations
Operation type and weapon used	<p>SVBIEDs</p> <p>SVESTs</p> <p>armed clash with light and middle weapons</p> <p>incursion raids and storming</p> <p>repelling of assaults</p> <p>hand grenades</p>	<p>assassinations and kidnappings:</p> <p>sniping, knife attacks, decapitation,</p> <p>HBIEDs explosives sabotage</p> <p>VBIEDs, IEDs</p> <p>Indirect fire weapons: mortars, and missiles, rockets</p>
Response to target by the defender	Likely: the attacker can be seen and responded to	Not likely: it cannot be responded to
Team mostly involved	<p>Incursion cells <i>Mafariz al iktiham</i></p> <p>Martyrdom cells <i>Mafariz Istishadyine</i></p> <p>Military cells <i>Mafariz A'askariya</i></p>	<p>Security cells <i>Mafariz Amniya</i>, explosive device cells <i>Mafariz obowat</i>, sniper cells <i>Mafariz al Qanasat</i>, air defence cells, <i>Mafariz difaa' jawi</i>, support cells <i>Mafariz isnad</i></p>
Resources and costs	High (except hand grenades)	Limited (except VBIED)
Damage for the enemy	High (except hand grenades). Both Physical and psychological	Limited (except VBIED). More Psychological than Physical
Target type	Static (except SVBIEDs used for assassinations)	In movement (except for HBIEDs and mortars)

Table 1. Classification attributes of confrontational and non-confrontational operations

## Confrontational operations

- Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (SVBIEDs).

Several aspects of IS' ontology are worth noticing. First, it separates SVBIEDs from VBIEDs by designating suicide operations as unique and distinct from "regular" car bombs or VBIEDs. SVBIEDs are more often used in sophisticated attacks as artillery fire. It represents a kind of human guidance system where the driver can adjust to the tactical situation in order to hit the target. They are direct operations used by attackers in order to break through lines and feign assaults. IS almost always deploys SVBIEDs against targets in fixed areas selected before a battle. In urban environments, they are projected directly at a fixed guarded target. SVBIEDs detonate using a combination of detonators including triggers initiated by the bomber or by a remote triggerman. Because it implies the sacrifice of a soldier who penetrates a fortification or a building, I classify SVBIEDs as a confrontational type of operation.

- SVESTs (Suicide Vest)

SVESTs consist of an explosive device taken and guided directly to its target by the human who brings and remains with it when it detonates and kills the bearer. This operation is termed in jihadi literature as a "Martyrdom operation"; S-VEST operations are often used to infiltrate mass groups of people. The suicide vest is compact and is packed with ball bearings or nails to target confined places with poor security gates. In a suicide operation, the bomber can have a fighting role before he explodes himself. This is the figure of the *inghimassi*<sup>152</sup>; it refers to a fighter equipped with rifles, hand grenades and a suicide vest, which is actioned after losing its ammunition. Generally, teams of *inghimassis* are tasked to storm a fixed target and inflict as much damage to the target as possible. Most of the time, SVESTs target civilians or are used in complex assaults involving other units. According to the British Medical Journal, the Lancet, suicide bombings in

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<sup>152</sup> Inghimas comes from the Arabic *Inghamassa* which means go deep in

Iraq between 2003 and 2010 killed more than 12 000 civilians while only 200 soldiers from the coalition were killed<sup>153</sup>. This kind of operation is considered as confrontational.

- Armed attack by “incursions” or “Iktihat”.

This type of operation refers to assault teams targeting security and military stationary checkpoints and headquarters. Organised as Special Forces commandos, they are constituted as a small platoon of highly trained soldiers with the objective of storming and seizing a fixed target. These tactics rely on light infantry units (between 10 and 15 fighters) clashing with the enemy at close range (50 to 250 meters). These massed raids with light weapon attacks are often combined with other weapons such as SVBIEDs or mortars. These operations are primarily carried out by the storming cells (*Mafariz Al Iktihat*) deployed after the detonation of an SVBIED or a VBIED. Because of their inherent offensive and penetrative nature, I consider this type of operations as confrontational ones.

- Repelling of assault and defensive clashes.

The group has claimed operations it called “repelling of assaults” carried against its positions. When obliged to withdraw, IS military units usually leave small teams of fighters willing to fight until death and occupy the enemy. Because of the defensive posture the fighters are obliged to adopt, this type of operation is considered as confrontational.

### **Non-confrontational operations**

- Improvised Explosive Device (IED).

An IED is a jury-rigged bomb with a radio-controlled detonator left by the side of a road. When the target approaches, the command to detonate is given by a remote detonator. The detonation is made by a “triggerman”, who usually hides at a distance from the target and normally escapes after the attack. An IED team supports him, consisting of an intelligence watcher, a builder, a layer and often a

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<sup>153</sup> Michael S Schmidt, “Suicide Bombs in Iraq Have Killed 12,000 Civilians, Study Says”, New York Times, 2/11/2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/03/world/middleeast/03iraq.html>

videographer. The intelligence team has to determine where the opposition forces routinely operate in the area. The layer has the most dangerous task of planting and masking the IED. Insurgents have developed very innovative methods to drop them off, by fashioning them as rocks or concealing them. At the beginning of the insurgency in Iraq, most of the IEDs were “command-detonated”.<sup>154</sup> As a “men versus vehicle hunter-killer”, it is the perfect type of operation where the insurgent can choose the right place and time for its operation. This kind of military operation is a non-confrontational type of operation.

- VBIEDs (Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices) and MCBIEDs (Motorcycle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices).

A VBIED is an IED planted in a vehicle and capable of causing much more damage. The use of VBIEDs or car bombs represents a weapon of projection for the group. They were used due to their lethality in order to inflict human casualties by targeting military and civilian targets. For our case study, the targets for VBIED operations carried out by IS’ cells are much more oriented against soft targets than SVBIEDs, which are used mostly by the group against hard targets. VBIED cells are part of what the group call in its jargon “security cells”, while SVBIED operations are executed by its “military cell” in the framework of sophisticated attacks. Because the vehicle is parked and actioned at a distance, there is no room for the defendant to confront the attacker, unlike for SVBIEDs, where the vehicle is observed and can be targeted before its detonation. For all these reasons, VBIEDs and MCBIEDs are non-confrontational operations.

- Assassinations.

Assassination teams, called “*Mafariz Amniya*”, meaning security cells, exclusively carry out these operations against selected targets: on duty or off duty soldiers, militiamen or government officials are targeted in their homes with silenced weapons. It also includes kidnapping and abduction for video execution with beheadings. Assassinations do not occur in the battlefield and resemble

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<sup>154</sup> Malcolm W Nance, *The Terrorists of Iraq*, CRC Press; 1<sup>st</sup> edition, December 18, 2014, p188

targeted assassinations carried out by secret services or secret police. Because the target is usually surprised and attacked by a concealed attacker, this type of attack is a non-confrontational operation.

- Bombing (Mortars, and rockets DCA).

An anti-rocket propelled grenade (RPG) is considered as the queen of the light battlefield weapons,<sup>155</sup> with its ability to project a highly explosive warhead on the enemy's vehicle. Also called, "Indirect fire weapon" it is effective in allowing an insurgent to project a weapon that could fly two or three kilometres and watch them fall onto their targets and explode. The main weapons are the 60 mm and the 82 mm. In 2012, thanks to the stockpiles taken from the rebels and the Syrian Army, IS had access to a large amount of anti-tank missiles or Cornet missiles. They used those missiles against helicopters and aircraft flying at low altitudes. These operations were carried out by the "air defence cells", called *Mafariz Difaa' Jawi*. All these operations were non-confrontational except for the hand grenade attacks. For that particular case, the propeller is situated at a distance but so close that it cannot avoid confrontation with its target.

- HBIEDs (House-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices).

During the first battle of Fallujah, buildings were rigged with a chain of IEDs in order to channel the American Forces into the houses and blow them up. This type of operation can take various forms by destroying the homes of soldiers, their families and tribal leaders or by ambushing enemy forces by attracting them in a house. These operations are non-confrontational and are carried out by the security cells.

- Sniping.

The Iraqi insurgency has witnessed the rise of skilled Iraqi snipers. Most of them using the Soviet SVD sniper, on a daily basis they target the enemy soldiers by generally killing or wounding them before fleeing. A sniper is often accompanied by a videographer who also acts as a spotter. The propaganda effect of such videos is essential. In the different reports redacted by the group, sniping is

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<sup>155</sup> Malcolm W Nance, *The Terrorists of Iraq*, CRC Press; 1<sup>st</sup> edition, December 18, 2014, P208

conducted by the sniper cells (*Mafariz al kans*). Because they are carried out from a long-range distance and because the defendant cannot see the attacker, sniping is considered a non-confrontational operation.

Some reports might be irregularly reported; for example, it is unclear from their reported numbers how IS categorises complex attacks that include more than one attack type (a raid of a building preceded by a suicide bomber attack, for example). At the strategic level, confrontational and non-confrontational operations can be orchestrated simultaneously during the same mission. Conveniently, regarding the counting of operations, the vast majority of the operations are claimed as single events. However, the group claimed complex operations involving many attacks as a single operation. For that reason, during the counting, they have been disarticulated as much as possible following the group's provided details. For example, when it claimed one operation involving a suicide bombing with the support of mortars and IEDs, the number of operations counted would be considered to be three involving one confrontational and two non-confrontational ones. Regardless of the authenticity and validity of IS' claims, this mixed-method considers this database as valuable for investigation because it reflects IS' narrative. It represents an insight into the IS' campaign against the ISF exposing the means at its disposal and the geography of its operations.

#### [4- Methodology for assessing IS' adherence to LH's](#)

##### [Strategic axioms](#)

##### **The choice of prison breaks and urban assaults**

After focusing on the group's tactical patterns and the volume of operations claimed, we need to understand how they were synchronised and orchestrated at a strategic level for its most important operations, its urban assaults or prison break attempts. The assessment of the group's deployed strategy for such complex operations gives us the possibility to verify the investigation's main hypothesis, which is the group's adherence to LH's indirect approach guidelines. This part is divided into four sections. First, there is a strategic assessment of the 2012-2013 "Breaking the Walls" campaign of prison breaks attempts, which

culminated with the attack on the Abu Ghraib prison. The next parts follow the provincial scope of the investigation by analysing IS' 2014-2015 urban assaults in Anbar, Nineveh, Salahudeen and Diyala.

Regarding the nature of IS' military operations, the literature generally has focused on the so-called "signature attacks" the group carried out since its inception as "Tawheed wal Jihad" in 2003. During the early period of the US occupation (2003-2006), it was agreed that most of the insurgency efforts during the insurrection against US troops were carried out by insurgent groups using roadside bombs and ambushes. Meanwhile, Al Qaeda in Iraq was only responsible for 2% to 5% of the overall attacks<sup>156</sup> on the coalition and its Iraqi partners. It had more the attributes of a terrorist organisation than a rebel group. Nevertheless, its limited number of operations, which were very often massive suicide truck operations, attracted most of the media attention and had a powerful resonance. These attacks were the most lethal and spectacular in targeting symbolic targets. However, in the following years after the proclamation of the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006, the group evolved from a tactic of pure urban terrorism to a broader tactic of guerrilla warfare, with a much higher number of operations claimed using a wide range of tactics and methods. This first of the study is a way of grasping the moment of transformation from guerrilla to a conventional army, with the non-confrontational nature of the group's operations. This section presents different theoretical explanations to explain the success in manoeuvre warfare of an insurgent group from a strictly military perspective. As pointed out by Thomas Maurer, the quick metamorphosis in 2013-2014 of IS from a guerrilla to a conventional army able to conduct major offensive was "an extraordinary phenomenon – likely a military science novelty"<sup>157</sup> that is worth an in-depth study. It takes the shape of adopting a more conventional way of making war by conquering and holding territories and carrying out sophisticated attacks. Indeed, conquests are essential because they strengthen the group's resilience

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<sup>156</sup> Malcolm W Nance, *Terrorists of Iraq*, CRC Press; 1 edition, December 18, 2014, p114

<sup>157</sup> Thomas Maurer, "ISIS's Warfare Functions: A Systematized Review of a Proto-state's Conventional Conduct of Combat Operations", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29:2,229-244, 2018, p238, DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2018.1435238

with new resources from the spoils of war and additional populations under the group's control, which opens the possibility to raise taxes. At the same time, the group's prestige increases, which feeds its ideological resilience and popular support. Since the period of 2013-2014, conventional warfare mixed with insurgency warfare and urban terrorism has been the main types of combat the IS used in Syria and Iraq.

Omar Ashour has explained IS' endurance and military capability despite being always outnumbered and outgunned.<sup>158</sup> Combat methods used by the group are considered by him to follow Sun Tzu's guidelines, in particular with "the collection of intelligence information about the enemy, stealth before and after striking, beating the weak flank, using the element of surprise in a highly efficient way, avoiding the enemy in its strongholds and the time of readiness"<sup>159</sup>. This element of surprise is at the centre of the philosophy about war studies. On multiple occasions, LH quotes Sun Tzu by stating that in many ways, he was advocating for the indirect approach.<sup>160</sup> The strong point of the use of LH theory other than older war theories is that LH has in many ways relearned and applied the indirect approach to new technologies which make it more relevant to study modern conflicts.

During urban assaults, Ashour identifies the attack pattern like the following: a simultaneous attack by combat units from three sides while using high-intensity fire to push the defending forces to the fourth side. After driving the defender forces on the fourth side, they are hit by SVBIEDs, which causes their collapse. Improvised explosive devices have also, according to Ashour, proved to be highly effective in "breaking through frontlines, initiating attacks and as a defensive tactic"<sup>161</sup>. They can shock and confuse the enemy while inflicting extensive

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<sup>158</sup> Omar Ashour, "Enigma of 'Baqiya wa Tatamadad': The Islamic State Organization's Military Survival, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies", 19/04/2016, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/04/enigma-baqiya-wa-tatamadad-islamic-state-organizations-military-survival-160419081219493.html#e24>

<sup>159</sup> Ibid

<sup>160</sup> Liddell Hart 1967, p11 – 12

<sup>161</sup> Ibid



damage that can bring a quick resolution of the battle despite being outnumbered. His conclusions are a mere generalisation of IS' modus operandi while attacking cities. Its description is accurate, but he does not extend its observation to other case studies and does not include a more detailed analysis of IS' military and political behaviour.

Regarding the 2012-13 resurgence, Lewis considers that IS established support networks within disenfranchised Sunni communities in Iraq, in particular during the 2013 protests. The year of 2013 was a shifting moment when IS brought its desert forces and urban terrorist cells into a new strategic framework. It changed its tactics from terrorist attacks against civilians to assaults on military targets. From that moment, IS started to use manoeuvre warfare to overrun the Iraqi Security Forces. For her, the first element of IS' 2012-2014 resurgence was its belt manoeuvres, by projecting itself from desert or suburban areas into urban centres. She traces back this manoeuvre to Zarqawi's time and describes it as a "way to organise a battle plan around a principal city using dispersed units, informal tactics, and freedom of manoeuvre to compromise the main defences of a conventional enemy"<sup>162</sup>. She also compares IS' urban assaults to "pinch manoeuvres"<sup>163</sup>, designed to close the gap between cities under its control, isolate enemy forces and reduce their ability to counter its advance. Lewis' contribution to the understanding of IS' strategy and tactical patterns is essential since she was one of the first to point out to IS' resurgence in 2013 by establishing an extensive study<sup>164</sup> on IS' car bombs waves in 2012 and 2013 showing the existence of a clear strategic pattern orchestrating these attacks. However, her study is an interpretation of its strategy centred on car bombs waves rather than a more comprehensive analysis through the scope of a military doctrine.

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<sup>162</sup> Jessica Lewis Mc Fate , "The ISIS defence in Iraq and Syria : countering an adaptive enemy", Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Report 27, May 2015, p16, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20Defense%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20--%20Standard.pdf>

<sup>163</sup> Ibid p24

<sup>164</sup> Jessica D Lewis, "Al Qaeda in Iraq is resurgent", Middle East Security Report 14, September 2013, [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf)

This study goes further and is dedicated to analysing sophisticated decisive attacks, and urban assault carried out by the group. For this case study, decisiveness is defined as the operation's ability to achieve its overall objective. The sophisticated attacks are the prison breaks attempts launched in 2012 and 2013, which took the shape of six sophisticated attacks in one year in different provinces. IS' cells conducted missions that were so qualitatively different from its conventional approach to military and terror operations with outsized strategic results. Its predecessors tried to attack prisons but never reached the objective of successfully storming them. This kind of operations is crucial since it differs from classic terror attacks; it has a more significant impact on the general campaign. Even though they were labelled as terrorist attacks by the media, these operations evolved in their complexity as rightly pointed out by Jessica Lewis. The use of the indirect approach can determine if, behind the same attacks, the groups used comparable methods but on a different scale. The choice of studying IS' prison breaks is not fortuitous; there is a research gap on how the group, planned and executed these complex operations in 2012-2013. As stated by Whiteside, Ranieri and Rice<sup>165</sup> much additional research is needed to understand prison breaks carried out by the group. According to them, the "Abu Ghraib/Taji raids should be evaluated in greater detail as it is quite possibly the most impressive undertaking ever conducted by the Islamic State, considering its scale and the difficulty in breaking key leaders out safely".<sup>166</sup>

### **Liddle Hart Axioms for his doctrine**

From a pure military-strategic perspective of conducting war, Liddle Hart presented a set of recommendations<sup>167</sup> an army commander should take or avoid to achieve military success. From a general perspective, he instructs never to attack the enemy's centre and focus on a peripheral strategy to dislocate and

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<sup>165</sup> Craig Whiteside, Ian Rice & Daniele Raineri, Black OpsIslamic State and Innovation in Irregular Warfare, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 201910.1080/1057610X.2019.1628623

<sup>166</sup> Ibid

<sup>167</sup> This study will rely on LH's second revised edition of *Strategy* originally published in 1967 to articulate his *Strategy of the Indirect Approach*.

exploit. More precisely, he should follow eight axioms<sup>168</sup>. LH's objective with these "maxims" would be to operationalise them and provides practitioners with a framework informing strategy development and subsequent tactical execution. The methodology is following a deductive top-down research design with Liddle Hart's axioms by observing in different case studies the adherence or not of IS to these principles according to our sources.

LH's principles come from his understanding of strategy and his review of history. He concluded that wars are generally "won when the means of war are applied in a way that an opponent is unprepared to meet, that is, employed in an indirect fashion"<sup>169</sup>. He stressed out that "strategy does not need to overcome resistance, but rather exploit the elements of movement and surprise to achieve victory by throwing the enemy off balance before a potential strike".<sup>170</sup> The strategist's aims are to "seek victory under the most advantageous circumstance in order to produce the most profitable result."<sup>171</sup> The notions of manoeuvre and surprise the best capture LH's theory and have the following attributes: they are paramount for victory and should make the fighting as smooth and bloodless as possible. A broad definition of the indirect approach would be the combination of movement and surprise to dislocate the enemy and force him to a position of weakness to achieve with minimum violence a defined political objective. Indeed, for our case study, the firepower of the Iraqi Army and its allies was unmatched by IS. However, the group was able to provoke a dislocation and exploit it later. Liddle Hart envisioned exploitation as the commander's ability to take advantage of dislocation without giving the enemy the time to recover. Because the explanation of dislocation is at the centre of LH's military theory, it is one of the best-suited ones to explain this case study. There is a consensus in the literature that the Iraqi Army was poorly prepared and dislocated despite its human and material superiority over IS' insurgency. This investigation does not just describe

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<sup>168</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. Toronto: Meridian, 1991, p335

<sup>169</sup> Ibid p25

<sup>170</sup> Ibid 337

<sup>171</sup> Ibid p339

this state of dislocation like most of the publications on the subject or explain it only from the prism of endogenous factors but rather operationalize a military doctrine to explain it.

In this section, we will verify IS' following of LH's axioms for specific case studies. The prison breaks in Tikrit and Abu Ghraib /Taji, the assaults on Samara and Mosul, Fallujah, Ramadi and in Salahudeen province. These cases studies were selected because of their relevance to explain IS 'resurgence, their decisive nature and their strategic outcome. They are documented events with a sufficient amount of information available from different sources. At the same time, these operations are still under-investigated generating more questions than answers. For example, the Abu Ghraib prison break was insufficiently examined and the Mosul urban assault is mostly studied through the prism of the fall of the Iraqi army or as the result of a conspiracy of generals and politicians who gave the city to IS.

The use of LH is useful and have a high potential for giving us a better understanding of IS resurgence First, IS guerrilla warfare articles released in 2019 are in line with the general ideas behind Liddle Hart indirect approach guideline for manoeuvring, provoke and exploit dislocation of the enemy. Second, dislocation must occur before any blow against an opponent, for our case study, it took place for the Iraqi Army all along the year of 2014. LH's approach offers us a robust conceptual framework capable of explaining it and understand how IS exploited it to build up and achieve political gains. For the 2012-2013 prison breaks or the 2014-2015 urban assaults, we will test if IS applied or not these strategic guidelines.

### **1-“To adjust the end to the means”.**

Liddle Hart states that the “usual reason for adopting a strategy of limited aim is that of awaiting a change in the balance of force – a change often sought and achieved by draining the enemy's force, weakening him by pricks instead of risking blows”<sup>172</sup>. We can understand it by the necessity of adopting a strategy

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<sup>172</sup> ibid

of limited aim waiting for a favourable shift in the balance of power. The perfect example of that, according to him, is Fabian's strategy of avoiding confrontation against Hannibal's army. His patient strategy was not a sign of weakness but rather a wise way of avoiding an irrational waste of resources for an objective difficult to achieve. Using the same rationale but with religious explanations IS guerrilla warfare article released in 2019 called the mujahedeen to "not entrust themselves with something beyond their power by attacking targets that surpass their ability to break the enemy in them, and they should not consider this type of battles to be fateful or decisive in documenting the course of war with their enemies. Instead, they are fight-and-flight, whose aim is to prepare for another fight, and so on".<sup>173</sup> Testing the adherence to this strategy will be achieved by observing when the group shifted the strategy from guerilla to open confrontation with its enemies.

**2- "To always focus on the objective and consider that there are many ways to reach it".**

The accomplishment of an objective is more important than the means employed to reach it. It does not suggest that the end justifies the means but emphasises the importance of considering that accomplishing an objective is never possible just by one mean. Here, the idea is that the military option is not the only possible mean and that a military commander's strategy should show adaptability and flexibility." This part will assess IS' adherence to this recommendation by observing the versatility of the group in the methods and military tactics used to achieve a military objective (takeover of prisons, military bases or cities).

**3- "Choose the line (or course) of least expectation" and 4 -"Exploit the line of least resistance".**

This refers to achieving psychological surprise. Axioms three and four are generally in the spirit of dislocating the enemy. Operation Overlord is an

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<sup>173</sup> See for a translation Aymen Tamimi, Islamic State Insurgent Tactics: Translation and Analysis, Apr 26, 2019 <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation>

applicable example where the Nazis were never expecting the operation to take place at that time and place. The line of least resistance is the physical equivalent of the line of least expectation as Liddell Hart suggests “They are the two faces of the same coin”<sup>174</sup>. LH defines what he considers as physical dislocation when it takes shape in “upsetting the enemy’s dispositions and, by compelling a sudden ‘change of front’, dislocates the distribution and organisation of his forces; separates his forces; endangers his supplies; menaces the route or routes by which he could retreat in case of need and re-establish himself in his base or homeland”<sup>175</sup>. Psychological dislocation follows almost immediately by affecting the minds of commanders. It is stronger when sudden and emphasised by the feeling of being trapped<sup>176</sup>. It can also require the use of the least expected route, as Liddle Hart states: “In strategy, the longest way round is often the shortest way home.”<sup>177</sup> IS’ articles on guerrilla tactics emphasised the importance of surprise by striking the points of least resistance. For example, by briefly occupying cities such as Haditha in 2012, when, pretending to be Iraqi SWAT forces, ISI fighters seized most of its parts, as they before withdrawing from them to the desert in a matter of hours. In other instances, the author stressed the importance of attacking poorly defended area he described as the following when “mujahideen’s assaults on regions take the form of assaults that the police or security apparatuses carry out when the enemy’s defences in the area are very weak or not present, which facilitates the mujahideen’s entrance into the area and moving about in it with freedom during specific hours”<sup>178</sup>. To verify the application of these two axioms, we will observe, in the moments of dislocation of ISF during the assaults on prisons or urban centres the routes used by the group, the

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<sup>174</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. Toronto: Meridian, 1991,

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid* p339 – 340

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid* p340

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid* p336

<sup>178</sup> See for a translation Aymen Tamimi, *Islamic State Insurgent Tactics: Translation and Analysis*, Apr 26, 2019 <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation>

methods used to deceive their enemies and how IS' troops exploited their dislocation.

#### **5-“Taking a line of operation, which offers alternative objectives”.**

This principle derives from the idea of putting the enemy on the “horns of a dilemma” by forcing him to disperse his forces. As Liddle Hart states, it should make him indecisive as he recalls that “a strategist should think in terms of paralysing, not of killing”<sup>179</sup>. By attacking at the same time multiple objectives, it distracts the enemy from his opponent’s principal objective and makes the attainment of some objective easier<sup>180</sup>. It refuses to the enemy the possibility to concentrate its forces and disperse them on multiple objectives. The following of this recommendation will be observed through the study of the two of the most important assaults in different campaigns which involved a simultaneous attack. (Abu Ghraib prison break, Ramadi, Mosul and Samarra urban assaults).

#### **6-“Ensuring that both plans and dispositions are flexible—adaptable to circumstances”,**

This axiom means that the strategist has to be flexible and adapt his approach to each situation. It stresses the importance of planning and flexible troop deployment. IS' Al Naba 2019 article on guerrilla doctrine stressed this principle. The writer considered that “the extent may change during the expedition, according to the degree of the resistance of the enemy and the speed of the advance of the mujahideen, as the amir may think in all probability that the rapid collapse of the enemy will help to realise a greater advance, with a weak possibility of the existence of an allurement plan on the part of the enemy, along with the presence of the safe path for withdrawal and preventing encirclement”<sup>181</sup>. Interestingly, the 2019 article on IS' guerrilla warfare gives the example of the assault on Mosul in 2014 as a case of reactivity of the commander to a dislocation

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid p347

<sup>180</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd rev. ed. Toronto: Meridian, 1991 p343

<sup>181</sup> See for a translation Aymen Tamimi, *Islamic State Insurgent Tactics: Translation and Analysis*, Apr 26, 2019 <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation>

of the enemy by broadening the attack during the operation. We will observe the adherence to this axiom by seeing the change of operations in scale and manpower distribution depending on the circumstances surrounding prison breaks attempts or urban assaults.

The last two principles are negative ones, guiding the strategist's actions not to repeat mistakes already done.

**7 -“Do not throw your weight into a stroke while your opponent is on guard—whilst he is well placed to parry or evade it”<sup>182</sup>.**

Attacks should not be waged in a way that strengthens the enemy's defences. Liddell Hart always considered that the enemy must first be “paralysed” before an attack may be successful.<sup>183</sup> IS' Al Naba article on guerrilla states that fighters can “embark on breaking the strong lines of resistance around the towns and countrysides, and entering them by force, in order to strike points of the enemy inside them, and thus seizing the area in the shade of the confrontation that may wound the enemy, then withdrawing before the enemy should regain its awareness and reorganise its ranks or bring auxiliary forces from outside its area to regain control.”<sup>184</sup> In that case, we can see that IS' is not reluctant to attack strong points at the contrary of LH's recommendation. The adherence to this recommendation will be assessed through the observation of IS units that penetrate well-fortified targets during sieges, urban assaults or prison breaks.

**8- “Do not renew an attack along the same line (or in the same form) after it has once failed”.**

No additional resources should be used for an already failed operation without reassessing its variables and using different means. The following of this recommendation will be observed for case studies when IS first assault was

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid

<sup>183</sup> Ibid p349

<sup>184</sup> ibid



thwarted or failed. We will focus on IS attack on Abu Ghraib which was conducted a decade ago by IS' predecessors and the war of attrition the organisation conducted in Ramadi from January 2014 to May 2015 with multiple assaults conducted in order to take over the city centre.

The adherence of some axioms will be observed in all cases studies, while the following of some others is only observable for some given cases for a question of available data or impossibility to observe.

## **5- Grand Strategy, propaganda and framing**

From Hart's definition of Grand Strategy, we will try to see what political, social or economic efforts the group has made to attain its military objectives and explain its political behaviour. It also presents a way to verify if the takeover of cities such as Fallujah, Mosul, Tikrit, and Ramadi was not exclusively due to the use of "hard power". LH advanced three recommendations that should be followed at Grand strategy level that are in line with the indirect approach. IS as described by many publications as a resilient organisation (Whiteside, Hashim, Fishman, Mac Cants, Lewis) despite the extreme pressure it has been submitted to. As indicated at the beginning of this section, after receiving a shock, resilient organisations adopt a set of principles and routines that permit them to survive. Grand Strategy, because of its long-term reach and holistic nature, can correspond to this process of developing a new set of non-kinetic and long term principles inside an organisation. This Grand Strategy can also influence IS' relations with other actors. Indeed, IS' experience in Iraq towards other actors has been shaped by an approach which has oscillated between cooperation and open conflict, maximalist and gradualist objectives.

### **1-The better your strategy, the easier you will gain the upper hand and the less it will cost you.**

The first axiom of LH is general and refers to the use of non-kinetic means in the strategy in order to gain political and military objectives. "The better your strategy, the easier you will gain the upper hand and the less it will cost you." From LH's perspective, a better strategy in Grand strategy is a one using non-

military means that are less costly such as economic measures or diplomatic pressures. Liddell Hart considers that the political ends must be in line with the total military means available for achieving them, should this condition be met, a real economy of forces might be realized<sup>185</sup>.

We will verify IS' application of this guideline by focusing on IS' non-kinetic interactions with competitive social structures such as the tribes and other insurgent groups. Regarding the tribes, we selected to study IS relations with two large tribal confederations: the Dulaim in Fallujah and the Jubur in Salahudeen. Their selection is not fortuitous both are large tribes, have been active in the Sahawat movement and have undergone divisions during IS 'resurgence. The framing analysis of IS propaganda also lies into the umbrella concept of Gran Strategy and shows how the group mobilised the Sunni Community in a strategy in line with this axiom. We verify the success of this strategy by evaluating at what extent IS' frame resonated among the Sunni protestors' frames in 2012-2013. An alignment of these frames could explain the resonance of IS' frames among its targeted audience that could lead to mobilise or make neutral some of them.

## **2- The more brutal your methods, the more bitter you will make your opponents, with the natural result of hardening their resistance**

Regarding the use of violence, LH stated that excessive use of violence against its enemy could be counterproductive: "the more brutal your methods, the more bitter you will make your opponents, with the natural result of hardening their resistance".<sup>186</sup> We will compare the use of violence by IS with LH's vision of how it should be used and explain IS 'discriminatory use of violence.

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid p336

<sup>186</sup> Ibid

### **3-“The more you intend to impose your peace entirely of your own choosing the more likely your adversary will rise against you”.**

After achieving military victory, LH considered that “The more you intend to impose your peace entirely of your own choosing the more likely your adversary will rise against you”.<sup>187</sup> Waging war while preparing for peace refers to foreseeing the peace condition and building the requirements for a durable peace. We will assess its adherence by IS after observing the 2014 post-military victory IS policy towards the Sunnis who were its enemies, the other communities it controlled, the regional powers and the International system.

#### **Frame analysis methodology**

As mentioned above, Liddle Hart produced some guidelines of the indirect approach to apply to Grand Strategy around three principles governing war policy. The one which can be expanded to the use of propaganda is when he states that “The better your strategy, the easier you will gain the upper hand and the less it will cost you”.<sup>188</sup> In other words, it refers to the ability to use limited resources to achieve its objective. Thanks to the digital age and the irruption of Social Medias the potential of reaching a very large audience with low-cost means is now possible for insurgents. A low-cost strategy is to generate mobilization for a movement like IS primarily through propaganda, the creation of frames with limited costs ( video productions easy to edit) that resonates among the population (through mass diffusion) and change the position of the targeted audience from neutrality to support or from hostility to passivity as described by Galulla.

This part sheds light on the issue of IS’ rise and popular support it enjoyed in the context of the protests of Sunni Iraqis in 2012 and 2013. The literature has pointed out how these protests, which started peacefully, certainly helped IS’ resurgence by dispersing the Iraqi Army and turning many tribes from fighting IS

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<sup>187</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd rev. ed. Toronto: Meridian, 1991, p361

<sup>188</sup> Ibid

to fighting the Iraqi Government. Facing these events, we will assess if the group had its Grand Strategy which goes beyond its military actions and focuses on its ability to generate support among the Sunni population in Iraq. The group labelled popular support (*Hadina shaa'biya*) as a Taghut in the case it delays the full application of sharia<sup>189</sup>. However, from the 2010 strategic document we mentioned before, it proved to be aware of the necessity of forming a constituency inside the Sunni population. Its strategy for gaining support is not based on a pragmatic gradualist approach but instead on the thriving on the sentiments of humiliation, the show of its moral superiority and the rise of sectarianism as the primary identity shaping political allegiances and solidarities.

This part methodology assesses the group's ability to produce frames that resonate among its targeted audience in order to enjoy a critical mass of popular support. Framing is a form by which actors in a social movement diffuse ideas and discourse that resonate among those they intend to mobilise. The theory argues that frames are articulated to resonate with the grievances of the Iraqi Sunni population. When there is frame alignment, recruitment and mobilisation are possible. The objective of this last section is to determine the coincidences between IS' discourse towards the Sunni population and its demands that were widely voiced during the 2012-2013 protests. This part of the study is articulated to verify if the group purposely voiced demands and grievances shared by a large part of the Sunni population which were not part of IS' support base. It will be an opportunity not to focus on the ideological or religious frames the group is famous for diffusing, but rather emphasise the social and political dimension of its discourse.

One of the aspects emphasised by the literature regarding IS' propaganda was its mastering of new technologies and social media to diffuse its frames. Much of Atwan's analysis in his book "ISIS the Digital Caliphate" focuses on the role that digital technology has played in its rise. From their prolific use of darknet, hacking

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<sup>189</sup> Naba Newsletter issue 121 available at <https://jihadology.net/2018/03/01/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-121/>

and international cyber-attacks to the development of jihadist computer games and Islamist match-making apps, IS members have proven themselves to be, in Atwan's words, "masters of the digital universe."<sup>190</sup> Its contribution echoes Stern's and Berger's extensive analysis of IS' managing of social media recruitment and propaganda, especially on Twitter and Facebook<sup>191</sup>. However, by showing the development of rivalry between IS and Al Qaeda supporters on social media, this tool which is by nature leaderless has proved to be very difficult to remain under control in case of defection or rising dissatisfaction among its ranks.

### **Frame Resonance**

Frame resonance is explained by the framing theory developed in the 70's by academicians to explain popular mobilization. Based on Goffman's research, the term "framing" is employed to describe the justifications and appeals, and movements used to mobilise support. McAdam refers to it as the "conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action"<sup>192</sup>. Snow and Benford argue "that variations in success, both within and across movements, depend in part on the degree to which movements attend to problems of consensus and action mobilisation through the core framing tasks of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing"<sup>193</sup>. They consider that at a minimum, a group needs to describe their grievances persuasively, called "the diagnostic frame", and present a feasible solution, "the prognostic frame". This involves the construction of "vocabularies of motive"<sup>194</sup> in a risky and costly enterprise such

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<sup>190</sup> Abdelbari Atwan, *The Digital Caliphate*, University of Oakland , 2015, p15

<sup>191</sup> Stern and Berger , *ISIS : The State of Terror*, William Collins , London pp148 -175

<sup>192</sup> McAdam, D, "Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency", 1930–1970. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p22

<sup>193</sup> David A. Snow and Scott C. Byrd, "Ideology, Framing processes, and Islamic Terrorists Movements", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly Review* 12(1), p124 <https://webfiles.uci.edu/sbyrd/home/terroristmovements.snow.byrd.2007.pdf>

<sup>194</sup> C. Wright Mills, "Situating Actions and Vocabularies of Motive" *American Sociological Review* Vol. 5, No. 6 (Dec., 1940), pp. 904-913 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2084524>

as collective action. Concerning the thesis' subject, Snow and Byrd apply the framing theory to Islamist groups in their article released in 2007, "Ideology framing process and Islamic terrorist movement"<sup>195</sup>. They stated that the diversity in the political Islam spectrum across the world and the numerous internal debates among them have to do mainly with ideology. They considered ideology as "a homogenised, monochromatic manner and not conceptualised as tightly coupled, inelastic set of values, beliefs, and ideas"<sup>196</sup>. In other words, ideas, beliefs, and events are interconnected in ways that help to justify and inspire Islamist movements and their activities.

Regarding their frame of reference, Islamic movements are considered as a new social movement that focuses primarily on creating identity and meanings. Contrary to the idea that frames for Islamist groups are rigid God-given principles based on sacred scriptures, Wiktorowicz argues that they are flexible and adaptable to changing political and socioeconomic circumstances. The discourse itself is less critical than how it is formed and adjusted to achieve frame resonance. For the case study, I use IS' frames<sup>197</sup> in terms of diagnostic and prognostic frames in a specific context, the rise of protests among the Iraqi population in 2012-2014. The possibility that some of its frames mirrored the demands of the Sunni Arab population and by achieving frame resonance, it could explain popular support enjoyed or at least its acceptance by the Sunni population after conquering Iraqi cities in 2014.

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<sup>195</sup> David A. Snow and Scott C. Byrd, "Ideology, Framing processes, and Islamic Terrorists Movements", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly Review* 12(1), P124 <https://webfiles.uci.edu/sbyrd/home/terroristmovements.snow.byrd.2007.pdf>

<sup>196</sup> Ibid p132

<sup>197</sup> For the purpose of our research will use the definition of Social Movement Organization which emphasized on the organizational nature of the group. It refers to a "complex, or formal organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempt to implement those goals" as opposed to social movement which represents "a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure"

## Selection of IS' Al Furqan videos

Six major IS videos centred on Iraq and released in the years preceding the protests were selected to identify the main socio-political frames produced. From the video material released by IS, the group has identified grievances of the Sunni population in Iraq by spreading them before the start of the protests. After selecting them, we will compare them with the bulk of the protestors' demands presented a few years later.

Al Furqan is one of the media wings for the Islamic State and its prior incarnations and represents its oldest and most influential media production in Arabic.

- “*Khawanatu Al Assuna*” (Lit the traitors of the Sunni) released in 2010 by the Islamic State of the Iraq Ministry of Information<sup>198</sup>.
- “*Saleel al-Sawarim*” ( Lit The Clanking of the Swords); four episodes were made available by Al Furqan Media Production in July 2012, August 2012 and 2013 and May 2014 <sup>199</sup>.
- “*Khams A'wam Aala ikamat Adawla*” (Lit Five years after the establishment of the state) released in 2011 produced by Al Furqan Media Production<sup>200</sup>.

These sources are unique, not well studied (contrarily to the post 2014- material for Western Audience) and mainly focusing on the Sunni population with constant subjects and themes to mobilise the population. The inclusion of these sources not studied before is a part of the thesis' originality. IS has before the other groups based most of its propaganda on video rather than audio. Following the audio-visual revolution its media wing, Al Furqan has quickly developed itself and

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<sup>198</sup> Lit “The traitors of the Sunni”, a video issued by the Islamic State's Minister of Information, available on the following link; <https://archive.org/details/Koonah>

<sup>199</sup> Lit “The Clanking of the Swords”, al-Furqan Media presents a new video message from the Islamic State of Iraq: “Clanking of the Swords available on the following link [https://archive.org/details/abohafsaalkaisy\\_gmail\\_HD4](https://archive.org/details/abohafsaalkaisy_gmail_HD4) and <https://jihadology.net/2012/08/16/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-clanking-of-the-swords-part-2%E2%80%B3/>

<sup>200</sup> Lit “Five years after the establishment of the State”, a video issued by the Islamic State's Al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, available on the following link : [https://archive.org/details/osod\\_hhgg21](https://archive.org/details/osod_hhgg21)

sophisticated its propaganda. The group was also keen to distribute its propaganda with CDs containing videos depicting its production or with social media propaganda campaigns to develop them. It includes pictures, magazines, videos, music that are shared on social media and different Internet sites. IS also maintains credibility by substantiating promoting claims through frame consistency, primarily by leaning on religious scripture. The limit of these sources is we don't know to what extent they have been diffused and what weight they had in changing the posture of the targeted audience toward the IS. The only way to make us infer that there is frame resonance is by comparing IS' frames to the ones of the 2013 protestors.

## **6- Sources and Study's limitations**

For security issues, IS is naturally reluctant to share their data about their structure and resources. For that reason, I have chosen to study the group's frames and strategy which are available and accessible. The group is a prolific producer of written records and press releases that allow some insight into its strategy and operations. In recent years, it has developed a metrically driven following of all of its military operations. The empirical data available is what the group has produced in internal and public documents (Al *Naba* newspaper published on a weekly or monthly basis and video productions from Al Furqan). Because of their growing activities on social media, primary online sources available on academic platforms such as Aaron Zelin's website "Jihadology"<sup>201</sup> are an essential source for the study. Internal documents belonging to the group seized by opposing forces can also offer valuable insight into the group's organisational structure or internal communications. Other leaks about the group's structure have been found recently and were shared by newspapers and the researcher Ayman Tamimi, who collects authentic internal documents of IS from its private sources in Syria and Iraq.

This thesis draws upon a range of sources which use different languages, Arabic, English and French. The sources of this study are part of its originality.

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<sup>201</sup> Url : [www.Jihadology.net](http://www.Jihadology.net)



By focusing on IS main video series in 5 years, it can give a unique insight into IS propaganda efforts and frames, find patterns and recurring themes. Until now, no study has gone deep into IS' frames before its resurgence targeting the Iraqi Sunni population and testing the resonance of its frames with the protesters. It will verify the evolution in IS prognostic of the situation in many years under different commandment showing the resilience of its ideology and frames. An important secondary source comes from articles from local and regional press. By using local Iraqi sources, it focuses on relatively under-reported events. Al Mada press, a daily Arabic newspaper published in Iraq, is one of the principal sources for local news reports. The limit of using only local news press is that they could omit events that do not attract media attention. At the same time, it should be stressed that, because of their ties to government and state apparatus, they can have incentives to downplay their impact.

For the tactical analysis part of the study, I examined the statistics provided by the organisation in its two consecutive annual reports of the years of 1433 (27<sup>th</sup> November 2011 to 14<sup>th</sup> November 2012) and 1434 (15<sup>th</sup> November 2012 12<sup>th</sup> November 2013) of the Islamic lunar calendar<sup>202</sup>. For these two reports, all the military operations claimed by the group were already classified by the authors of the document. Also, for the period between November 2013 and April 2014, I selected the statistics published by the group's newspaper *Al Naba Magazine*<sup>203</sup> during these five months.

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<sup>202</sup> This period corresponds with one year in the Hijri calendar (1434), which started in the middle of November 2012. New magazine from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham: al-Bina' Magazine #1,' Jihadology, March 31, 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/31/new-magazine-from-the-islamicstate-of-iraq-and-al-sham-al-bina-magazine-1/> . 2. "al-Furqan Media presents a news bulletin from Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham: "Harvest of Operations for the Year 1433 H in Iraq," Jihadology, August 14, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/14/al-furqan-media-presents-a-news-bulletin-from-islamic-state-ofiraq-and-al-sham-harvest-of-operations-for-the-year-1433-h-iniraq>

<sup>203</sup> "Other monthly reports were compiled and found in the following address: <https://justpaste.it/jnobnaba53> (issue 53), <https://justpaste.it/ffms> (issue 52), <https://archive.org/details/51511435> (issue 51), <https://archive.org/details/Anba50An51435> (issue 50).

Researchers and commentators can genuinely be sceptical about the validity of the group's figures in these reports. A team of researchers undertook an examination of IS' claims by selecting a small sample of the operations claimed by the group in Baghdad in one month and tried to corroborate them by cross-checking them with local media.<sup>204</sup> They found that press releases confirmed IS' claims at a reasonable level. Inventions of attacks are not common in IS' communications in Iraq; what appears more is an inflation of the death toll for propaganda purposes. In order to make an assessment of IS' claims, the authors undertook an examination<sup>205</sup> by selecting a small sample of the operations claimed by IS in Baghdad and tried to corroborate them by crosschecking them with local media reports. They found out that of 345 attacks claimed by ISI between in 1433 of the Hijri calendar, 57% were reported by local media. Without excluding the fact that IS could overstate its numbers, the operations of the group which were underreported were mostly minor operation with a very limited number of casualties which were not reported by medias (85% produced fewer than three casualties). However, within the 198 operations in Baghdad which had a media match, they found that the average number of casualties as reported by the ISI was 25,95 which was close of the one reported by the media 21,47. A more profound analysis of the veracity of IS claims extended to other provinces would be helpful to tackle this issue. Because minor operations do not receive media attention, the idea of cross-checking the operations claimed by the group with press coverage is unrealistic for this study because of the vast number they represent.

This research thesis has also other limits. First, it is not a policy book as it offers no great recommendations and is neither a counterinsurgency nor a counterterrorism investigation. The primary objective is to provide an analysis of the group's resurgence from a new perspective that could add to other existing explanations of the complex phenomenon of IS' resurgence. Second, being a war zone, Iraq is not an accessible terrain due to its danger. A researcher needs

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<sup>204</sup> Daniel Milton, Bryan Price and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi , The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: More than Just a June Surprise , CTC sentinel , June 2014 Vol 7 issue 6 p2

<sup>205</sup> Ibid p4

sponsorship from the state or the group to visit, which creates an inherent bias since the researcher can only access the sources the group want to show him. At the same time, the reliance on IS' figures in the quantitative part of the study makes its results dependent on the reliability of their claims, which affects the research's findings. Third, I will not discuss the group's military performance or strategy of the group in the Syrian theatre because of the issue of space and the importance of Iraq for the object of the study, which remains an Iraqi creation.

Regarding the use of LH's theory of the indirect approach to the study, some of its limitations are related to criticisms of the method by its detractors. The leading criticism of Liddle Hart's belief was the possible vicious circle it creates. Liddle Hart's analysis of World War II and the blitzkrieg made its critics accuse him of retroactively fitting his arguments to explain history. John Mearsheimer criticised his scholar methodology as "constantly comparing events, individuals, and situations to find generalisations that would hold across space and time".<sup>206</sup> Deeply traumatised by the bloodbath during the First World War, Liddle Hart's concerns about Britain's national security problems were theorised in reaction to his personal experience and disapproval of mass battles generating bloodbaths. In other words, his indirect principles could be an outgrowth of this desire. Despite disagreeing with some of Liddle Hart's historical methods, Brian Bond offers us the reasons behind the relevance of Liddle Hart's contribution as a military historian and theorist by stating that "whatever its shortcomings from the viewpoint of scholarship, the strategy of indirect approach can be strongly defended as an educational doctrine (... ) There was a great deal to be said for encouraging a new generation of officers to think for themselves, and in particular to think in terms of achieving success by surprise and superior mobility; to value intellect and professional skill more than tradition and seniority, and to make the fullest use of science and technology to minimise casualties".<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> John Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the weight of history*, Cornell University Press | Cornell Studies in Security Affairs , 2010

<sup>207</sup> *ibid*

Furthermore, the use of the indirect approach strategy as a conceptual framework for other researchers shows the validity of this theory by the number of research papers and theses developed around it during the last decades. Tuvia Ben-Moshe and Brian Bond used the indirect approach's guidelines to analyse its influence on the Israeli military doctrine<sup>208</sup>. Liddle Hart's principles are said to have had a profound impact on a generation of military commanders of the Israeli Defence Forces during the successive Arab – Israel wars<sup>209</sup>. It was applied first by the militia under the Haganah by using tactics of guerrilla warfare and avoiding a direct clash with the main body of its enemy or as a conventional army in 1968, where it was used to surprise and for the targeting of supply routes against Arab armies. More recently a research thesis<sup>210</sup> defended in 2016 by Lieutenant Brandon Thomas Euhus analysed cyberwarfare case studies through Liddle Hart's approach. He concluded that they applied many of LH's strategic principles. Phillip Meilinger also published an article<sup>211</sup> in 2017 on the applicability of LH's approach to modern warfare and specifically to the War on Terror. Since the beginning of the War on Terror from 2001, he considered that the direct approach had been used widely with limited results. He argued that the use of airpower, special operations forces with intelligence assets and local ground forces were sufficient to achieve objectives with limited costs and following the indirect approach, the best examples cited being the strategy adopted during the fall of the Taliban or the Libyan Regime.

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<sup>208</sup> Brian Bond, "Liddell Hart's Influence on Israeli Military Theory and Practice", *The RUSI Journal*, 121:2, , 1976, pp83-89

<sup>209</sup> Tuvia Ben-Moshe, "Liddell Hart and the Israel Defence Forces - A Reappraisal *Journal of Contemporary History*", Sage Publications, Ltd Vol. 16, No. 2 (Apr., 1981), pp. 369- 391

<sup>210</sup> LT Brandon T. Euhus, "Cyberwar and B.H. Liddell Hart's Indirect Approach", *USN* June 2016, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1019971.pdf>

<sup>211</sup> Phillip Meilinger, "Basil H. Liddell Hart: His Applicability to Modern War", *Air Power Studies*, Vol20 Edition 3, Winter 2017, <http://www.airpowerstudies.co.uk/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/airpowerreviewvol20no3autumnwinter2017editioncompletefinal.pdf>

# IV- Factors influencing IS' resurgence and military performance.

This part is a background section presenting factors debated to be behind the resurgence of IS and its military performance. There has been an increasing number of books on IS; the literature is vast and is continually evolving. Nevertheless, the quality is debatable; there have been great pieces which are authoritative while others were hastily written following the media coverage the group received from its takeover of Mosul. I present in this chapter most of the available and relevant literature explaining IS' performance from 2003 until the end of 2018. Because the literature on the movement is vast, I decided to classify it according to different angles of research and explanations of the group's various manifestations:

1. The group's military strategy and tactics.
2. The military doctrine of the Baathist Iraqi Army and its supposed influence on IS.
3. The resources and the group's structure.
4. IS' discourse and ideology.

The last part is about literature gaps and what could be the contributions of the research to the general understanding of the group.

## 1- IS' Military commanders and the central figure of Hajji

### Bakr in its 2012 resurgence

The figure of the Military general commander has been advanced to explain IS' military improvement. Military strategy in IS' organisational apparatus is devoted to the Minister of War, which became separated from the *Amir*, the political leader, after Zarqawi's death. The Minister of War only has the task of developing the group organisation's military capacity. The first was Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir (2006-2010), followed by Numa Mansour Al Zeedi (2010), Haji Bakr (2011-2014), Mohammed Al Bilawi (2014), Omar al Shishani (2014-2016) and Gulmurod Khalimov, from 2016. The timeframe that interests us the most is when Haji Bakr was the military leader, which corresponds to the period of rebound from 2011 to 2014. Haji Bakr was a veteran battlefield commander and former colonel of Saddam Hussein's army. He was assigned as a security official in the Islamic State's assassination squads hunting principally Sahawat leaders. He was elevated to the position of head of the military council in 2010. He is said to have been an adherent of the ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu<sup>212</sup>. Known as "the prince of shadows", he defended Abu Bakr Baghdadi's appointment as chief of the ISI because of the group's need for a powerful and representative avatar behind which to rally (as argued in the strategic plan of 2010). After his appointment, he recommended striking back when the Americans began their withdrawal from Iraq. The situation, he wrote "will be strongest politically and militarily for the Islamic plan to completely seize the reins of control in Iraq"<sup>213</sup>. After becoming ISI's supreme military commander, he was considered as having the responsibility for improving the group's military organisation. Under his command, the organisation saw the development of specialised units with specific skills called *mafariz* (see Annex 1). What changed also was the

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<sup>212</sup> Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark, *The Exile : the Flight of Osama Bin Laden*, Bloomsbury, May 2017, p346

<sup>213</sup> *ibid*

recognition that warfare was holistic. It was not only limited to kinetic military actions but part of a more comprehensive and broad strategy.

Haji Bakr was dispatched to Syria in 2012 to overview Jolani's achievements with Jabhat Al Nusra. He began to manifest its independence from the leadership in Syria by going too far in its cooperation with other rebel groups and refused to publicly acknowledge his links to ISI and carry out attacks against Syrian rebels in Turkey. Journalist Christoph Reuter of Der Spiegel<sup>214</sup> revealed in 2015 the paramount role played by Hajji Bakr in Syria. He discovered documents seized by the rebels after his killing in January 2014 in Tel Rifaat. The documents describe the process and mechanism of seizing power in a permanent place. It consisted of a technically precise plan for an "Islamic State Intelligence service" in order to take control of society. It starts with the infiltration of villages and neighbourhoods with the opening of a "Dawah office". It refers to an Islamic missionary centre to recruit followers and spread its ideas. Recruits are required to provide information about their relatives, their village and district.<sup>215</sup>

These political warfare actions require an in-depth knowledge of the socio-political landscape in order to launch actions such as assassinations of key figures, bribing and co-optation. During the first state building experience by Zarqawi, he had little knowledge of the socio-political and cultural landscape of Iraq. At that time, according to Ahmed Hashim, the group did not have the "capability, resources or mindset to shape the environment in his favour"<sup>216</sup>. The rise of a generation of ex-Baathist leaders such as Haji Bakr with a state experience could have pushed IS to think as a state and not as an organisation. It affected its hybrid warfare capacity as well as paved the way for a new holistic strategy. Haji Bakr was also known to be the architect of the "Amniyat" structure inside the IS security apparatus. Such units are tasked with clandestine work in

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<sup>214</sup> Christoph Reuter, "Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State", Spiegel Online, 18/08/2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html>

<sup>215</sup> The authenticity of Reuter's documents given by Syria rebels has been put into question by researchers and specialists.

<sup>216</sup> Ahmed S Hashim, *The Caliphate at war*, Hurst and Company London, 2017, p211

the organisation, the society and behind enemy lines. It constituted itself as a real intelligence apparatus for domestic and external surveillance and clandestine operations such as targeted assassinations. These efforts have made it easier for the group to grasp territory, control the population and impose stability.

## *2- IS' Military doctrine and tactical improvements to explain its resurgence.*

Jessica Lewis made another important contribution to the understanding of IS' tactics and strategy in 2015. She explained IS' strategy during the 2014 summer offensive and pointed to three crucial elements explaining its success. She recognised that IS is a strategic organisation which has used different warfare style types of action in what she calls "Hybridized warfare."<sup>217</sup> This concept challenges conventional militaries with distinct doctrines for traditional war, irregular war, and counter-terrorism. IS' resurgence was also due to its ability to manoeuvre in three types of terrain: deserts, cities, and suburban areas.

Regarding the 2012-13 resurgence, Lewis considers that IS established support networks within disenfranchised Sunni communities in Iraq, in particular during the 2013 protests. The year of 2013 was a shifting moment according to her when IS brought its desert forces and urban terrorist cells into a new strategic framework. It changed its tactics from terrorist attacks against civilians to assaults on military targets. From that moment, IS started to use manoeuvre warfare to overrun the Iraqi Security Forces. For her, the first element of IS' 2012-2014 resurgence was its belt manoeuvres, by projecting itself from desert or suburban areas into urban centres. She traces back this manoeuvre to Zarqawi's time and describes it as a "way to organise a battle plan around a principal city using dispersed units, informal tactics, and freedom of manoeuvre to compromise the main defences of a conventional enemy"<sup>218</sup>. She also compares IS' urban

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid p17

<sup>218</sup> Jessica Lewis Mc Fate , "The ISIS defence in Iraq and Syria : countering an adaptive enemy", Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Report 27, May 2015, p16,



assaults to “pinch manoeuvres”<sup>219</sup>, designed to close the gap between cities under its control, isolate enemy forces and reduce their ability to counter its advance. Lewis’ contribution to the understanding of IS’ strategy and tactical patterns is important since she was one of the first to point out to IS’ resurgence in 2013 by establishing an extensive study<sup>220</sup> on IS’ car bombs waves in 2012 and 2013 showing the existence of a clear strategic pattern orchestrating these attacks.

According to Charles Lister, we have witnessed three attempts by IS to create a state in the areas where it has operated since 2006.<sup>221</sup> IS’ first state-building project undeniably failed in Iraq in 2006 and another partial attempt failed in Northern Syria in 2013 with a similar fightback of local forces. The third attempt of 2014 has been the most successful one so far, with significant elements of operational learnings incorporated. Lister cites the rise of its capabilities from an insurgent group to the characteristics of a conventional army’s infantry coupled with the application of a qualitatively superior model of governance. Without inflating it, Lister considers the foreign fighters element as a paramount factor. Foreign fighters constitute an elite force, ideologically resilient with a high readiness to sacrifice and can be used against locals. However, their extensive use can be counterproductive since they can be perceived as an occupying force. Their massive arrival was thus important in order to explain the group’s resurgence.

Michael Knights’ analysis of the group’s tactics describes IS’ defensive style as reminiscent of the German military between 1944 and 1945 because of its lack

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<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20Defense%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20--%20Standard.pdf>

<sup>219</sup> Ibid p24

<sup>220</sup> Jessica D Lewis, “Al Qaeda in Iraq is resurgent”, Middle East Security Report 14, September 2013, [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf)

<sup>221</sup> Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, Hurst and Co Publisher, London 2015, p 271

of manpower and weaponry.<sup>222</sup> Regarding IS 'offensive style, he considers that its "cult of the offensive," manifested in tactical restlessness, is due to the group's motivation and significant level of autonomy on the field. In another article on IS' military-political strategy, he explains IS' military victories by the mobility and tactical surprise it had shown against its enemies. The other purpose of their offensives is to provide good footage for IS' propaganda videos that fit its "winner's messaging" and its slogan "remaining and expanding"<sup>223</sup>.

Omar Ashour describes precisely the tactics and strategy of the group's affiliate in Sinai<sup>224</sup>. He argues that the group's strategy is similar to other under resources provinces of the group (Diyala and Hama) and has two shapes, a defensive and offensive version. In its defensive form, it has an aim of "endurance", with three objectives: recruiting locals, controlling villages and tunnels, and blinding the authorities by targeting informants and spies. As an offence strategy, the group aims at attrition and fear by targeting the security forces relentlessly using conventional tactics and urban terrorism. The goal is to continue to follow the objectives cited above until the exhaustion of the enemy forces.<sup>225</sup>

"Caliphate at War" is a recent book written by Ahmed Hashim to explain the evolution of the group from 2003 to 2017. The author adopts a holistic approach, tackling all the possible manifestations of the group, and this can be considered as one of the most relevant books on the group. Regarding IS' military strategy, he defends the idea of the emergence of a jihadist way of warfare<sup>226</sup>. He defines it as a product of contemporaneous warfare and not as a legacy of historical Islamic warfare. He also adds that the way of warfare is not self-sufficient and it

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<sup>222</sup> Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello, "The Cult of the Offensive: The Islamic State on Defence," CTC Sentinel, April 30, 2015, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-cult-of-the-offensive-the-islamic-state-on-defense> .

<sup>223</sup> Ibid

<sup>224</sup> Omar Ashour, "Sinai's Insurgency: Implications of Enhanced Guerrilla Warfare", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 2017, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2017.1394653

<sup>225</sup> Ibid p 12

<sup>226</sup> Ahmed S Hashim, *the Caliphate at war*, Hurst and Company London, 2017, p186

has borrowed from “the enormous body of non-Islamic ways of warfare”<sup>227</sup>. This way of warfare is different between jihadist groups and depends on the geography and topography of each theatre of operation. Zarqawi’s warfare was first conditioned by his awareness of the imbalance of power. Consequently, he waged an indirect war against the US by targeting its Iraqi partners in what he called “unrestricted warfare”. He used this term to show first the important volume of resources allocated by the group and the indiscriminate use of violence.

Regarding IS’ resurgence, he suggests that the US withdrawal put an end to ISI’s decline in Iraq. Iraqi forces did not have the “the energy to plan, execute fast-paced operations [...] the kind the Americans were capable of”<sup>228</sup>. The ease of the pressure from the US special operation forces coupled with the end of the CIA 24h satellite surveillance and intelligence gathering effort in Iraq helped the group to rebuild its capabilities. Another element advanced by Ahmed Hashim as explaining the rise of IS’ military and organisational capacity is the Darwinist evolution inside the organisation. Being hunted during that period resulted in the decimation of 80% of the leadership, which left “the smarter and more powerful operatives in place”.<sup>229</sup> As confirmed by researcher Kyle Orton, most of these leaders were former regime elements with sufficient military and intelligence experience to survive and attain the pyramid of the organisation naturally.<sup>230</sup>

The other factor advanced to explain the rise of IS’ military capability is the development of a more professional and institutionalised military council in 2012<sup>231</sup>. The emergence of a new body inside the military structure called the “Committee for Military Manufacturing and Development” initiated an increase of the group’s organisational capability by organising an effective categorisation of its weaponry seized and an equal distribution to its units dispatched in both Syria

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid p187

<sup>228</sup> Ibid p205

<sup>229</sup> Ibid

<sup>230</sup>Kyle Orton, “The Riddle of Haji Bakr”, 10/11/2015, <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/11/10/the-riddle-of-haji-bakr/>

<sup>231</sup> Ahmed S Hashim, *The Caliphate at war*, Hurst and Company London, 2017, p209

and Iraq. This Committee was also behind the evolution of IS' logistical chain and the upgrade of its weapon construction abilities to an industrial grade. The last factor presented by Hashim is the specialisation of its units and the experience coming from skilled fighters from abroad (mainly Chechnya). Specialised units were better coordinated between assault teams, artillery sappers and anti-tank units. The group's fighter quality was also pointed out by Ashour as a factor explaining its performance and increased military capabilities. He divided its fighters into three categories: former members of regular armies, unlawful combatants with military experience and local recruits who have long-term experience in combating local regime troops. The synchronisation of such units on the battlefield was the proof for Hashim of the emergence of an "organised, professional military force"<sup>232</sup>. However, he mitigates the explanation of IS' military resurgence being solely due to the increase of IS' capability by emphasising the weaknesses and ill-preparedness of its foes, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Peshmerga.

Very recently in 2018, two other articles have been published in order to understand better IS' military doctrine from the perspective of its hybrid nature and the way it evolved from a guerrilla to a conventional army. Andrea Beccaro studied IS warfare in the light of hybrid warfare theory. He stressed the increasing role of terrorist tactics and urban space, and more widespread use of modern technology regarding the use of drones, suicide attacks and the Internet.<sup>233</sup> Thomas Maurer assessed in his research paper published in March of 2018 that IS military approach respected fundamental principles of the conventional conduct of combat operations matching the attributes of a conventional army.<sup>234</sup> According to him, it includes systematising the weapons employed into categories, their synchronisation in the battlefield under a hierarchical military

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid p210

<sup>233</sup> Andrea Beccaro, "Modern Irregular Warfare: The ISIS Case Study, Small Wars & Insurgencies", 29:2, 207-228, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2018.1433469

<sup>234</sup> Thomas Maurer, "ISIS's Warfare Functions: A Systematized Review of a Proto-state's Conventional Conduct of Combat Operations", Small Wars & Insurgencies, 29:2, 229-244, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2018.1435238

command and control executed by experienced commanders. Has also raised the question of the development the group has witnessed from insurgency to conventional army in its capacities and capabilities.

Finally, some opinions consider IS' military strategy from the scope of its religious creed, which can be traced to early Islamic warfare and conquests. Norvell B. De Atkine<sup>235</sup> considers that Islamic scriptures shape the group's use of weather, terrain, their zeal and the use of deception. According to De Atkine, Islamic heritage is shaping IS' strategy, which is influenced by historical battles led by military commanders such as Khalid Ibn Walid in Yarmuk River in the Levant against Byzantines or in Qadisiyah against the Persians. Guy Y. Dampier<sup>236</sup> develops the same idea by trying to establish the historical influence of the ghazis on IS' strategy. A ghazi corresponds to an Islamic warrior who fought wars of raiding and counter-raiding in frontiers of Islamic empires in a low scale type of warfare. The article is more a comparison of IS' culture and how it creates its identity based on Islamic history rather than a real analysis of its military tactics. This vision wants to identify the group as a resurgent army from the Middle Ages with modernised weaponry and horses replaced by Toyota cars. We can say this vision about the influence of the ghazi' figures or Islamic sources on IS' military doctrine is cultural rather than strategic or tactical; it falls quickly into a narrow essentialist perspective of the group. Another point of view comes from an analysis of the parallelism of IS' strategy with historical figures who are not Islamic. This is the case with Gary Anderson's article<sup>237</sup>, which makes a comparison of the strategic rationale behind IS' and the Mongols' offensive led by Genghis Khan which involved the use of terror and a small group of

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<sup>235</sup> Norvell B. De Atkine, "Muhammad taught us how to fight": the Islamic State and early Islamic warfare tradition", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 3, (Fall 2015), <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1P3-4026842231/muhammad-taught-us-how-to-fight-the-islamic-state>

<sup>236</sup> Guy Y. Dampier, "The historical influence of the ghazis on the Islamic State," *Journal of Intelligence and Terrorism Studies*, 2017, 2: #EJTEV5, <https://doi.org/10.22261/EJTEV5>

<sup>237</sup> Gary Anderson, "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Theory and Practice of Jihad", *the Small Wars journal*, 2014, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-and-the-theory-and-practice-of-jihad>

professional fighters. Anderson also draws other parallels between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's policy and Stalin and Hitler's political-strategic approach with the use of collaborators and the way they took advantage of the grievances of the conquered populations.

### *3-The military doctrine of the Baathist Iraqi Army and its supposed influence on IS.*

The influence IS' leaders might have received from their Iraqi commanders who have undergone different experiences in the Baathist Army is one of the main subjects of debate among researchers. The discussion situates in determining the level of influence ex-Baathist members have had on the group's organisation, strategy and tactics. Mingling in Camp Bucca and fighting alongside al-Zarqawi's fighters some ex Baathist officers were propelled as leaders of the group's military apparatus such as Haji Bakr (a colonel in the Air Force intelligence), Abu Muhanad Al Suweidawi (lieutenant in the same Air Force intelligence unit) or Mohamed Al Bilawi (captain in the Iraqi Army). All were part of the first high-ranking Iraqi officer circle espousing Salafi jihadism and joining the nucleus of fighters around Zarqawi in 2003. If they did adopt IS' ideology and interpretation of Islam, they also imported their skills, military tactics and doctrines from their experience with the Iraqi Army. According to the Governor of Anbar Province, Ahmed al-Dulaimi, the three men graduated from the same military academy at the beginning of the '90s<sup>238</sup>.

From a historical perspective, the war between Iraq and Iran shaped the military doctrine of the Iraqi Army. The conflict started in 1982 over a territorial dispute in a war that neither Iran nor Iraq thought would expand to a total war killing one million people during eight years. Indeed, the conflict escalated progressively from a limited to a "total war" between the two armies. At the beginning of the

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<sup>238</sup> "Military Skill and Terrorist Technique Fuel Success of ISIS", New York Times, 28/08/2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/28/world/middleeast/army-know-how-seen-as-factor-in-isis-successes.html>

conflict, Saddam's fear of a potential military coup forced him to centralise the Iraqi command and control structure model.

The Iraqi Army had "a rigid top-down command and control system"<sup>239</sup> where senior commanders made all the decisions. Consequently, junior officers and ground commanders feared to take any decision or hold responsibilities. A decade later, facing the US ground invasion in 1991, division and corps commanders did not have any authority over units"<sup>240</sup>. After deliberately weakening its command with purges, Saddam's army lacked any doctrinal basis on which to conduct operations during the first years of the conflict with Iran. Accurate information from the battlefield, unless very positive, was rarely relayed to the commanders because of the fear of punishment<sup>241</sup>. The use of high force ratios in offensive battles for the Iraqi Army did not guarantee success against the religious zeal of highly motivated Iranian troops. When the war started, Iraq's troops outnumbered Iran's by a ratio of 5:1. In the end, and after mass conscriptions imposed by the Iranian regime, it was closer to 2:1. Until 1987, the Iraqi Army adopted a static defensive posture against the repeated direct mass attacks from the Iranian troops to counter their human-wave direct attacks. Following this defensive modus operandi, the Iraqi Army established a broad, integrated fortified zone augmented by large quantities of artillery. After suffering heavy losses, Saddam changed his strategy, ordering his troops to surround cities and to starve them out and avoid confrontation<sup>242</sup>. He planned to hold the area captured and to pressure Khomeini into negotiating a formal settlement. On certain occasions, the Iraqi Army used deception to lure its enemy, as in the

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<sup>239</sup> Pelletiere and Douglas Johnson, *Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War*, U.S. Marine Corps, v. 1, 1991, pp. 10 and 39

<sup>240</sup> Kevin Woods, Williamson Murray, and Thomas Holaday, *Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2009, p95

<sup>241</sup> Sean McKnight, "The forgotten war: The Iraqi army and the Iran-Iraq war", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 2:1, p9, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592319108422972>

<sup>242</sup> L Pelletiere and Douglas Johnson, *Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War*, U.S. Marine Corps, v. 1, 19910, p9 -8

battle<sup>243</sup> fought near Susangard. Three hundred tanks participated on each side, and the Iraqis won by using a double envelopment tactic. They tricked the Iranians into thinking that they were giving way, and then they closed their flanks on the Iranians and destroyed almost 200 Iranian tanks. This episode could constitute one of the few chapters where the Iraqi Army applied LH's indirect approach principles on the battlefield. To highlight the Iraqi Army's performance, three crucial factors were behind its success at the end of the conflict: air superiority, an immobile opponent, and an abundance of resources used extravagantly.

Despite those shifts in action (deception and siege of cities), the Iraqi Army's adherence to LH's guidelines was limited by the narrow margin of flexibility accorded to field commanders, the high confidence in ratio and firepower superiority and the waste of resources to achieve its objectives. Throughout the conflict, because of its numerical superiority and airpower, the Baathist army preferred to adopt frontal assaults at the indirect expense approach such as manoeuvring and flanking operations. It relied heavily on its artillery, which was deployed according to a predetermined firing plan in a static position. As reported by the CIA, assaults were "preceded by artillery barrages" and relied "heavily upon armoured units for offensive operations"<sup>244</sup>.

In his article published by CTC Sentinel magazine<sup>245</sup>, Barak Barfi considers that "somehow Baathist military doctrines have continued to shape the Islamic State's practices in the case of the use of SVBIED as an alternative for heavy artillery in breaking through lines and feigning assaults"<sup>246</sup>. The most striking difference he

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<sup>243</sup>Ibid p9

<sup>244</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Subject: "Iraqi Offensive Tactics," March 1995, [http://www.gulflink.osd.mil/declassdocs/cia/19961102/110296\\_cia\\_61989\\_61989\\_02.html](http://www.gulflink.osd.mil/declassdocs/cia/19961102/110296_cia_61989_61989_02.html)

<sup>245</sup>Barak Barfi, "The Military Doctrine of the Islamic State and the Limits of Ba'athist Influence", CTC sentinel, February 2006, p19



points out is that the Iraqi Army did not rely much on intelligence. In contrast, he confirms that Ba'athists "did not learn from one battle to the next"<sup>247</sup>, largely because tactical forces were only successful in heavily scripted operations and static positions. For these reasons, Ba'athist forces were not only trained but indoctrinated to conduct purely static defensive operations"<sup>248</sup>. Unlike IS' high degree of decentralisation, Iraqi army commanders could not innovate and improvise without high-level orders. For IS, its bottom-up decision-making process, giving a large margin of manoeuvre to its local commanders, according to Ashour, permitted the group to "make quick decisions when facing superior forces"<sup>249</sup>.

Baathist strategists during the First and Second Gulf War did not rely on indirect approaches and manoeuvring, preferring frontal attacks and relying on a superior ratio, heavy artillery and airpower. Its highly centralised command accorded little margin of manoeuvre to its field commanders with limited intelligence gathering for pre-battle reconnaissance. Those features seem to be opposite to the Islamic State command structure, which is decentralised, giving a margin of manoeuvre to local commanders and relying heavily on Intel. From his experience with Peshmerga forces, Dr Andreas Krieg was brought to the same conclusion.<sup>250</sup> He states that IS ground commanders enjoy a wide margin for manoeuvring.

The group's decentralised structure gives the ability to the tactical commanders to take crucial decisions without the authorisation of his superiors. This flexibility, combined with the group's high mobility, has been essential for its successful asymmetrical warfare. According to Hashim<sup>251</sup>, IS' small unit's performance in

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid

<sup>248</sup> Kevin Woods, "Iraqi Perspectives Project Phase II, Um Al-Ma'arik (The Mother of All Battles)" Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2008, p 91.

<sup>249</sup> Omar Ashour, "Enigma of 'Baqiya wa Tatamadad': The Islamic State Organization's Military Survival", Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 19/04/2016, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/04/enigma-baqiya-wa-tatamadad-islamic-state-organizations-military-survival-160419081219493.html#e24>

<sup>250</sup> Hamza Hendawi, Qassim Abdul-Zahra, and Bassem Mroue, "An IS Secret to Success: Shock Troops Who Fight to the Death", Associated Press, July 8, 2015

<sup>251</sup> Ahmed S Hashim , *The Caliphate at war*, Hurst and Company London, 2017, p198

firefights is better than the one of the insurgencies and Baathist army units. This tactical engagement of units requires a high level of training, quick decision-making and good quality and quantity of firepower. The Iraqi Army had bad training, and its small units had poor skills while the Iraqi insurgency from 2003 to 2011 did not have a tactical proficiency and lacked basic military skills to confront the US Army, which was excelling at those levels. For that reason, the insurgency opted in the majority for indirect fire (mortars) and IEDs. The development of IS' capability of small units in firefights was possible later because of the establishment of safe havens and training camps from 2011 to 2014. As a conclusion, there is a consensus that former regime elements brought the organisation valuable military experience. Nevertheless, except for the use of artillery with suicide car bombs in offensive attacks or defensive reply, the military tactics of the Baathist Iraqi Army differed mostly from those of IS and its adherence to the indirect approach was very limited.

#### **4- The resource and structural organizational perspective explaining IS' resilience.**

Another scope of research explaining IS' performance, whether its demise in 2008 or re-emergence in 2013, focused its attention on the group's resources and structural organisation. From the period between 2006 and 2010, the Rand Foundation published exhaustive pieces of research on the group's financial records, as well as its internal structures, using as the main source the Department of Defence's Harmony database<sup>252</sup>. The most important and exhaustive research piece was recently released and entitled "Foundations of the Islamic State Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010"<sup>253</sup>. It answered the following research questions: how the group organised and

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<sup>252</sup> Harmony documents (originals and translations) are available through the Combating Terrorism Centre website, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/harmony-program>.

<sup>253</sup> Johnston, Patrick B., Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick Ryan and Jonathan Wallace. *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1192.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1192.html)

financed itself and how it trained and allocated its members? The research team concluded that ISI assigned human capital rationally, with the suicide-bomber corps dominated by foreign fighters and the intelligence and security sections governed by Iraqis. ISI had a sophisticated, diversified fundraising system that relied almost entirely on raising money from within its operating territory. Its wages were not high enough to attract opportunists but sufficient to draw true believers to their project. It was a vertically integrated organisation with a central management structure and a functional bureaucracy. It sought to replicate these structures at multiple lower geographic levels in its provinces. Each geographic unit had substantial autonomy to pursue the group's strategic objectives but had routinely to send reports to the leadership; the central organisation used these reports to inform decisions and provide strategic guidance.

In Shapiro's chapter of his book "The Terrorist Dilemma"<sup>254</sup>, he studied the managerial challenges facing terrorist organisations and focused part of his research on ISI. He stressed that back in 2006-2008, the group had an important level of bureaucratisation. It took shape in the way that leaders delegated duties and monitored this process. Shapiro states that "Leaders typically exercise control over their agents through a standard set of bureaucratic tools including policy memoranda, reporting requirements, and tracking spreadsheets"<sup>255</sup>. This process of monitoring their agents is consistent with Peter Bergen's article, where he stated that AQI was "highly bureaucratized"<sup>256</sup>. Brian Fishman qualified the group as "extremely resilient"<sup>257</sup> because it was based on a centralised model that was paying off with time. The autonomy of local cells in their actions and self-funding permitted the group to maintain a profile despite having lost 80% of its

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<sup>254</sup> Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*, Princeton University Press, 2015

<sup>255</sup> *ibid* p. 75

<sup>256</sup> Peter Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al-Qaeda*, New York: Free Press, 2011, p169.

<sup>257</sup> Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan, The Master Plan ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, Yale University Press, 2017, p148

leadership. As a result, in case a section of the group was destroyed the other sections could continue to exist, recruit and wage attacks.

According to Meriam Benraad<sup>258</sup>, the group also benefited from the release of thousands of Iraqis detained since 2008. Throughout 2008, more than half of the total detainee population in Iraq was released, which consisted of 17,800 inmates out of 33,600. Suicide bombers of attacks perpetrated by the group in October 2009 were former detainees. They were released as part of the amnesty law. Because prisons have always been an incubator for radical ideology, ISI extensively recruited inmates from different backgrounds inside Iraqi jails. One of the elements behind IS' resilience is its ability to continue to reconstitute, recruit, organise itself from inside prisons. Thus, Benraad considers that this was one of the most significant factors behind the group's resurgence in 2012.

### **5-Ideology and framing to explain IS' resilience.**

Another scope of analysis of the group's rebound has centred its focus on its discourse and ideology on explaining its performances. Will McCants book's originality lies in his focus on the group's ideology. He argues that eschatology is determining its discourse and sometimes its actions. He points out that the group's actions have been shaped by eschatology. Unlike Al Qaeda's leaders who were careful in using end of time predictions, IS' leaders can act to precipitate events depicted by the Prophet Muhammad in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. According to McCants, the leader of ISI after Zarqawi's death, Abu Hamza Al Muhajir, was convinced that the days of the Mahdi<sup>259</sup> were coming, which caused the group's errors in 2006-2007 before its defeat<sup>260</sup>. However, the use of eschatology can represent with the use of prophecies related to the Levant,

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<sup>258</sup> Meryem Benraad, "Prisons in Iraq: A New Generation of Jihadists ?", CTC Sentinel, Vol 2, Issue 12, December 2009, pp16-18, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/4b3146ab23513.pdf>

<sup>259</sup> The rightful ruler of the Islamic world that will lead the Caliphate and fight with Jesus the Antichrist)

<sup>260</sup> Will Mac Cants, *ISIS Apocalypse*, St Martin Press, 2015, p32

a potent tool for recruitment and appeal. McCants' main thesis<sup>261</sup>, that eschatology shapes IS' action, is at the heart of the debate explaining jihadi politics and their adjustment of theological arguments to fit operational realities.

One of the ideas coming back in the literature is that the weakness of the ISI during the 2007-2010 period is attributed to the incompetence of Zarqawi's successors, Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. As defended by McCants, Abu Hamza AL Muhajir was so profoundly influenced by eschatology that its leadership was irrational and counterproductive. Fishman mitigates this claim by recalling that "Abu Umar had built an organisation so resilient in a structure that it could survive a near-total decapitation and begin an under-the-radar rebuilding program"<sup>262</sup>. Regarding the organisation evolution, he identified a pattern seen since Fallujah in 2004, that military losses were being translated into political legitimacy at the expense of the Iraqi state. While ISI was losing in the short term, it was winning in the long-term, transforming battlefield setbacks into political gains.

"The Master Plan"<sup>263</sup> of Brian H. Fishman is another important book covering the evolution of the IS as an organisation and as an ideology. The group's evolution mirrors a plan conceived in November 2001 by Seif Al Adl, Al Qaeda's highest military strategist. He planned a seven-stage plan for world domination by 2020 after the creation of a global caliphate in the Levant in 2013. The book starts describing Al Adl's influence on Osama Bin Laden to accept al-Zarqawi despite his initial reluctance. Fishman's main contribution in explaining IS' evolution was

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<sup>261</sup> His source for such an assumption is a letter diffused from the ISI's supreme Judge in 2009 destined to Al Qaeda Central where he complained about irrational decisions taken by the leadership. Its authenticity has not been proven, it was diffused by a twitter account and could be part of al Qaeda's propaganda effort against the group. Further research may be required to verify if IS' use of eschatology was genuine or more part of its propaganda towards its targeted audience. A westernised young audience would be more attracted by such discourse rather than its traditional local public from the Sunni Arab provinces of Iraq.

<sup>262</sup> Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan, The Master Plan ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, Yale University Press, 2017, p147

<sup>263</sup> *ibid*

by introducing the concept of “Zarkawism”<sup>264</sup> as an ideological substrate explaining the group’s actions. According to Fishman, “Zarkawism” was built on a paradox since it seeks to establish an Islamic state but without the religious establishment. This idea can be mitigated by the fact that this paradox is inherent in the roots of Islamism itself and is not exclusive to IS’ ideology. Noah Feldman argues<sup>265</sup> that the fall of the concept of an Islamic state was the result of the marginalisation of the *Ulama* (religious scholars) by the post-colonial state in the Arab world. Before that period, they represented a counterweight to the dominant power of the executive branch. In response to that situation, the call for the return of an Islamic state in the Sunni world was ironically not made by scholars whose authority was put into jeopardy but by groups not linked to them and sometimes with western education. This protest was crystalized with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, whose main criticisms were towards *Al Azhari* scholars. Identified as State’s functionaries or “Scholars of the Palace”, their role ceased for Islamists to appear necessary for the application and interpretation of Islamic law and more generally for the restoration of the Islamic society.

One of the most relevant ideas in Feldman’s research is the paradox he emphasises in the discourse of Islamist groups. Given that Islamic law is the product of the scholarly community, how is it possible to build an Islamic state without scholars? The answer for him is the same paradox as the one pointed out by Fishman: Sharia without the scholars<sup>266</sup>. “Zarqawism” would only be a younger, more populist, violent and absolute version of this paradox by stating that religious legitimacy was only possible by engaging in violence. Fishman develops an interesting idea that the same factor limiting a broad appeal is

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid p70

<sup>265</sup> Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2008, p3

<sup>266</sup> Ibid p117

contributing to its resilience: its ideology, and what he labels “Zarqawiism”<sup>267</sup>. “Zarqawism” is a revolutionary movement, a cult for doctrinal purity and an ethos that glorifies action over intellectualism. Also, on a strategic level, it discourages the Islamic State from having a peaceful status with its neighbour<sup>268</sup>. Fishman concludes that because of “Zarkawism”, IS is therefore condemned to an ideological inflexibility that will never give them the ability to inspire a broad coalition in the Islamic world that could give them the final victory in 2020 as forecasted by Al Adl.

At the very inception of the modern jihadi movement in Afghanistan in the '80s, this ideological and strategical rift was starting to divide the partisans of cooperation like Abu Musab Al Suri or confrontation against their Taliban hosts such as Abu Hassan Al Muhajir, the future religious mentor of Zarqawi. The Taliban movement comes from the Deobandi creed, which is closer to Sufism than Salafism, and consider certain tribal rules above Sharia in resolving their disputes, making them a candidate for Jihadi theorists to cooperation through pragmatism or reject by ex-communication. For that reason, IS does not consider widespread popular support as a strategic goal in societies with singular codes and social practices. Contrary to other Islamist groups, IS' strategic spectrum does not include adapting or changing its ideology, even if strategy requires it like in the case of popular support. In the case of applying Sharia punishments (*huddoud*) to its population, Al Qaeda requires the education of the population by applying it gradually while IS' application is maximalist since its complete application is one of the war's objectives.

However, when Al Jolani was dispatched to Syria, he presented to the ISI leadership an amended strategy to be applied in Syria because of the difference in context between the two theatres. Iraq was under foreign occupation while Syria was witnessing a popular revolution. Tribes and the Muslim Brotherhood were powerful in Iraq while weak in Syria, and finally, Shia was a majority in Iraq

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<sup>267</sup> Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, Yale University Press, 2017, p248

<sup>268</sup> Ibid p71

while being a minority in Syria. As explained by Hassan Hassan<sup>269</sup>, Abu Abdullah Al Shami, one of the most prominent ideologues of Jabhat Al Nusra Sham, explained that, according to him, IS in Iraq agreed first with Jolani's strategy. Baghdadi, while commenting on Jolani's proposition, said: "that he was right and that transposing the situation of Iraq to Syria was a suicide"<sup>270</sup>. However, he does not elaborate precisely on the specific points of Jolani's methodology implanted in Syria with Baghdadi's blessing, whether it was the concealment of JN's affiliation to Al Qaeda and ISI, the cooperation with other rebel groups or the gradualist approach to Sharia. Before JN was a force holding territory, Jolani's and Baghdadi's strategies were the same but differed radically after group's empowerment. Regardless of the validity of Al Shami's testimony and the level of coordination between Jolani and Baghdadi, it confirms at least ISI leadership's strategic flexibility when the organisation dispatched Al Jolani to Syria in 2011. More investigation is necessary for the future to explain the level of dependence and synchronisation in methodology and strategy between Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq before their scission.

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<sup>269</sup> Hassan Hassan, "Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism", October 2018, Volume 11, Issue 9, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/10/CTC-SENTINEL-102018.pdf>

<sup>270</sup> Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shami, *Fi Dilal Dohat Al Jihad* lit "In The Shade of the Big Tree of Jihād", 2016, p189, <https://jihadology.net/2016/11/22/new-book-from-jabhat-fata%E1%B8%A5-al-shams-shaykh-abu-abd-allah-al-shami-in-the-shade-of-the-big-tree-of-jihad/>



# V- Islamic State's Ideological Hybridisation Process, Organisational Mutation and Quest for Survival Before 2011.

This part was written to familiarise the reader with the group's ideological roots, theological influences, personages, objectives and organisational history. As truthfully described in the literature, throughout its various manifestations and expansions in history, the Islamic State has evolved as a hybrid force and structured itself according to principles defined by its founding figures. The group has benefited from the expertise and skills of its military commanders coming from diverse backgrounds and diverse historical, theological and ideological influences. Because its ideology and theological doctrine profoundly influence its strategy, an overview of the group's ideological roots is necessary. Indeed, it has an impact on its strategy because it identifies the enemy, the way it has to be confronted and offers the theological justification for the war and how it can be conducted. For that reason, before analysing the group's military rebound and its strategy through LH's approach, I present the origins of its ideological and theological doctrine that shapes its strategy.

## *1-The Iraqi Salafi scene and Saddam's Faith Campaign during the '90s*

In retrospect, before the arrival of Zarqawi in Iraq in 2003, the local Salafi scene presented elements for being a fertile breeding ground for IS' ideology. In the 1980s, the Iraq-Iran war and the rise in oil prices made it easy for the Saudi state to promote their brand of Salafism in Iraq, while some analysts have also pointed to Saddam Hussein's "Faith Campaign" in the 1990s to explain the appearance of Salafism amongst the ranks of the Iraqi military and intelligence.

However, this latter explanation should not be exaggerated. Zarqawi later recruited former Iraqi Baath military commanders for their skills and military experience, not much for their religious credentials, and they would not have any influence on the group's ideological doctrine. In his book *Saddam Hussein and Islam*, Amatzia Baram<sup>271</sup> explains in great detail the reasons underpinning Saddam Hussein's 180-degree shift concerning Islam, from absolute secularism and nationalism to the promotion of Islam throughout society (construction of mosques, education, law, enforcement of Islamic punishments). It appears that the Faith Campaign, conducted under the supervision of Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri (considered at that time as the number two of the regime), promoted religion by following a way closer to Sufism rather than Salafism. The version of Islam that developed was apolitical and ecumenical, tightly controlled by the Baath party, so very different from the ideological and theological views of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab or Al Maqdissi.

Amatzia Baram identified the "U-turn point" from which the regime in Baghdad decided to change its relationship with Islam completely. This decision was highly influenced by many factors including the failure of pan Arabism, the war against Iran and the will of Saddam to attract support from the Sunni world and internally because of the increasing role of Islam as a social bond in society. The evolution took place during a 1986 secret meeting<sup>272</sup> between members of the Muslim Brotherhood from Sudan with the participation of Michel Aflak. For the author, this cooperation was more conceived as a political manoeuvre to gain support against its two competing neighbouring states, Syria and Iran, rather than an alliance with political Islam. Nevertheless, it developed as a strategy to domestically control religious affairs. The regime was fully aware of the increasing role of Islam in society among Sunni and Shia. By following Hassan Turabi's advice, Saddam considered that if the state "Islamized" itself, he would be fully justified to suppress all non-governmental Sunni and Shia religious opposition such as the Shia Daawa Party, the Salafi or the Muslim Brotherhood. The Faith Campaign,

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<sup>271</sup> Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Hussein and Islam, 1968–2003 : Ba`thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith*, Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 2013

<sup>272</sup> *ibid* p152

therefore, was more a decision to extend its grip on the religious affairs in the country and promote a new trans-sectarian Islam to give more legitimacy to Saddam Hussein's regime rather than a conversion of the state from Baathism to Salafism.

Indeed, the Baath Party did not change its ways to convert to Islam. The leaders and cadres of the party were going through "faith classes", but this did not alter their secular worldview. The army was the state apparatus body less exposed to the Faith Campaign. The supposed army's Islamization was limited to the use of Islamic symbols such as the renaming of divisions after Islamic heroes or historical battles. This makes us think that the widespread idea that Saddam's officers turned to Salafism because of the Faith Campaign needs mitigation. Moreover, this idea that Baathists shaped IS' ideological and political outlook is also considered as unfounded<sup>273</sup> by specialists such as Brian Fishman. Indeed, most of the Iraqi leaders of the political and religious apparatus of the Islamic State – such as the caliphs Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, or Abu Ali al-Anbari (former Minister of Finances) – were already part of the Iraqi Salafi underground circles in the 1980s and 1990s.

As recently described by Whiteside<sup>274</sup>, the influence of Wahhabism in Iraq began to rise in the 1980s and led to the creation of an Iraqi Salafi community which had little to do with the official Faith Campaign. The Iraq-Iran war caused an entente between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and the latter actively promoted Salafi thought in the former, flooding Iraq with Salafi literature. For those reasons, before 2003 the Iraqi Salafi scene was already virulently anti-Shia by nature. Abu Ali al-Anbari's two-part eulogy in the Islamic State media <sup>275</sup>shows how he was already a Salafi cleric with sharp anti-Shia and anti-Baath views, operating in Tel Afar before the

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<sup>273</sup> Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan, The Master Plan ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, Yale University Press, 2017, p202

<sup>274</sup> Whiteside C, "A Pedigree of Terror: The Myth of the Ba'athist Influence in the Islamic State Movement", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11(3): 2-18, 2017

<sup>275</sup> Al Naba edition 43

US invasion. Al Anbari's biography<sup>276</sup> written by his son and released in November 2018 by IS' dissidents informs us that he was already forming a local group before the invasion waiting the fall of Baathist regime to start his operations. After 9/11 he adopted the understandings of Takfir of modern jihadist thinkers, such as Abu Baseer al-Tartusi, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdissi. Shortly before the US invasion with the intervention of an Ansar Al Islam's emissary he met Zarqawi in Baghdad. His local group joined Ansar Al Islam as an insurgent group operating in Northern Iraq. His first action with his Salafi group was to target as a priority the Shia mosques, known as Husayniyat, in the region of Tel Afar. In 2004 he left Ansar Al Islam to pledged allegiance to AQI and became Zarqawi's deputy and later the head of Council of Consultation of the Mujahedeen (Majlis Shura Mujahideen). Hassan Hassan's main thesis in his article<sup>277</sup> on Anbari's legacy is to defend the idea that Al Anbari ideologically influenced Zarqawi and played a key role in shaping IS' ideology. Zarqawi himself, a Jordanian who did not have any experience confronting the Shias, became vigorously anti-Shia under the influence of Iraqi Salafists after observing Shia political party's and Iran's collaboration with the Americans during their invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. Underground Salafi circles were thus already present in Iraq in the 1990s and waited for opportunities to grow. These circles would later form the bulk of IS' key early members, and form the group's religious and ideological leadership a decade later.

## **2 – The central figure of Zarqawi in the creation of ISI from 2003 to 2006.**

After having exposed the ideological and theological roots of the group, this section sheds light on the different evolutions the group witnessed from 2003 until 2011 from a military and organisational perspective. From a nucleus of

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<sup>276</sup> Available in Arabic at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/al-waqf-al-dari.pdf> translation made by Aymen Tamimi available <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21877/the-biography-of-abu-ali-al-anbari-full>

<sup>277</sup> Hassan Hassan, "The true origins of ISIS", The Atlantic, November 30 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/isis-origins-anbari-zarqawi/577030/>

fighters gathered around the figure of Zarqawi, a decade later it became a proto-state, claiming to be the heir of the past caliphates in Islamic history. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US coalition, Zarqawi established the basis of its organisation, Tawheed Wal Jihad (TWJ). He surrounded himself with a group of trusted lieutenants and veterans from Afghanistan. They formed the elite of the organisation: the Egyptian Abu Hamza al-Muhajir his successor, Sheikh Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir his religious mentor, Abu Anas al-Shami named as the first official religious leader and the Lebanese national, Mustafa Ramadan Darwish. Composed roughly of 70 members<sup>278</sup>, the group pledged to fight against the US occupation as well as against the new Iraqi institutions. The structure of the organisation was headed by Zarqawi and a *Shura* Council (consultation council)<sup>279</sup>. It was divided into five committees: military, media, security, finances and religious.

### **The spectacular emergence of TWJ in Baghdad.**

Baghdad played a vital role in the Iraq war and the Sunni insurgency. In the collective mind of the jihadist movement, the city is considered as the former symbol of Islamic civilization's apogee during the ruling of the Abbasside Empire. Early on, Zarqawi recognised Baghdad as critical to its overall success while Osama Bin Laden called it "the epicentre of jihad"<sup>280</sup>. In 2003, Zarqawi managed to move its network from the isolated northern mountain areas of Kurdistan to the core of the Iraqi state capital. TWJ spearheaded the insurgency in Iraq in terms of violence, media attention and skills. Its first attack against the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad on 7<sup>th</sup> August 2003 was the first recorded car bomb in the history of the Iraqi Insurgency. During the same month, the group launched devastating attacks with suicide cars against the UN headquarters and the Shia political leader Bakr Hakim. By targeting Arab states, the international community

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<sup>278</sup> Hisham Al Hashimi, *A'Alam Daech* (Lit ISIS' world), Hikma Publishing and distribution London, 2016, p27

<sup>279</sup>Ibid

<sup>280</sup> Bill Roggio, "Osama bin Laden calls Baghdad the "Epicenter" of Jihad just as the Iraqi Political Stalemate is Resolved", Long War Journal , April 24 2004  
[http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/04/osama\\_bin\\_laden\\_call.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/04/osama_bin_laden_call.php)

and the Shia community, these operations posed as the basis of Zarqawi's strategy in Iraq.

During the year of 2005, the US coalition retreated from the city, giving the power to the new Iraqi security forces. Consequently, the security situation quickly deteriorated with the infiltration of Shia militias among ISF. In 2005, the group successfully found support in some areas in Baghdad such as Haifa Street and its belt and launched waves of attacks principally targeting the Shia community. TWJ's cells were composed of "security cells" named *Mafarez amniya*<sup>281</sup>, formed by a maximum of five members specialized in assassinations and IED attacks targeting the US forces as well the Iraqi security apparatus and the Shia community. Its presence in Baghdad's belts was critical for the group from a logistical and operational point of view. This presence granted it the possibility to transport weapons and fighters, finance their activities, run kidnapping rings, and run vehicle-bomb-making factories, all of which were necessary for the network to operate in the capital.

### **The Fallujah battles and the reinforcement in Anbar under the name of AQI**

Close to Baghdad, TWJ embedded its presence in the neighbouring province of Anbar, a large, mostly desert area in the western Iraqi desert and home to a 1.4 million Sunni population. For all the groups belonging to the Sunni insurgency, the province presented multiple elements considered as favourable for their resilience in a sociodemographic structure close to the Syrian border with existing Salafist networks in a region known for its deep resentment towards the US occupation. Situated 40km west of Baghdad, the city of Fallujah was the first place where Zarqawi established the group's command. Rapidly, the group made some neighbourhood of the town its stronghold at the expense of the other groups. Capitalising on local resentment and anger towards coalition forces, the killing of a US contractor in June 2004 triggered the first US major operation after the 2003 invasion. The city felt entirely in the hands of the Sunni rebellion composed of a myriad of 30 groups of 5000 fighters with an extreme majority of

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<sup>281</sup> Hisham Al Hashimi, *A'Alam Daech*, (Lit ISIS' world), Hikma Publishing and distribution London, 2016, p30

Iraqis. TWJ, which was at that time mostly filled with foreigners, was not the main component of the rebellion. During the talks between the rebels, Zarqawi's posture, despite his religious zeal, was to avoid a frontal confrontation<sup>282</sup> with the US Marines who were imposing a siege on the city.

Before the beginning of the Second Battle of Falluja, in October 2004, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to al Qaeda and changed the name of his group to Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia or Iraq (AQI). With financial support from donors reaching 680 000 euros per month<sup>283</sup> and the possibility to enjoy the support of all Al Qaeda's constituency (supporters, financiers, webmasters), Zarqawi's group became more powerful and gained in prestige. In return, Al Qaeda took advantage of the international resonance offered by the confrontation in Fallujah. The US mobilised for the Second Battle of Fallujah, called "the Phantom Fury", a force that surpassed by far the previous operation with more than 15 000 soldiers and the use of massive airpower to take the city. Two months of heavy urban fighting resulted in the killing of 2000 insurgents and civilians and 150 US Marines. However, the leaders of the rebellion, including Zarqawi, were able to escape the city, taking profit from the flow of refugees and the porosity of the American siege.

Despite the destruction of Fallujah, the whole Anbar Province witnessed the rise of AQI's activity in 2005 especially around and in the city of Ramadi. The level of dissatisfaction in the region regarding the government in Baghdad and the US coalition presence was at its highest at the beginning of 2005 with only 2% of participation of Anbari citizens in the first parliamentary election after the fall of Saddam Hussein. In 2005 alone, 158 Marines and soldiers were killed in Anbar, representing 58% of that year's combat deaths in Iraq. Anbar would be the most

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<sup>282</sup> Cahier du Retex, « Les Fantomes furieux de Falloujah Operation Al Fajr/Phantom FURY », (Juillet-Novembre 2004), p50

<sup>283</sup> Hisham Al Hashimi, *A'Alam Daech*, (Lit ISIS' world), Hikma Publishing and distribution London, 2016, p28

lethal province during the war for the US coalition with more than 1337 soldiers killed.<sup>284</sup>

Zarqawi organised TWJ as a covert commando force that represented only 5% of the Sunni rebellion in terms of manpower and became Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004. In this new structure and for the first time, a deputy of Zarqawi was appointed, he followed him and was aware of all his decisions<sup>285</sup>. Considered as his Vice Emir, he was tasked to take the lead in the case of the leader's death. According to his son, Abu Ali Al Anbari held that position secretly within AQI before his imprisonment by US forces in 2005<sup>286</sup>. According to a study on the Sunni insurgency made by Malcolm W Nance<sup>287</sup>, AQI's attacks in 2004-2005 counted for only 2%-5% of the attacks of the insurgents. The estimated number of AQI members, including supporters, was about 2000 men including cell members, facilitators and supporters<sup>288</sup>. This small force had a hugely disproportionate impact because of the group's ability to launch large-scale attacks using suicide car bombs. The first day of AQI's operation was on June 24, 2004, when it orchestrated multi-scale attacks across Iraq against police stations, US forces and the city of Baqubah. The Year of 2005 saw AQI's version of the "Shock and Awe" campaign with the massive use of SVBIEDs as the primary weapon used by the group.

After retreating from Fallujah, Zarqawi established himself in western Anbar and declared the border city of Al Qaim as his capital. AQI was also operating in Hit and the Haditha Triangle. Regionally, the group was able to attract and recruit

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<sup>284</sup> See Icasualties, <http://icasualties.org/Iraq/ByProvince.aspx>

<sup>285</sup> Hisham Al Hashimi, *A'Alam Daech*, (Lit ISIS' world), Hikma Publishing and distribution London, 2016, p40

<sup>286</sup> Biography of Abu Ali Al Anbari published by his son. Available in Arabic at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/al-waqf-al-dari.pdf> p52 translation made by aymen Tamimi available <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21877/the-biography-of-abu-ali-al-anbari-full>

<sup>287</sup> Malcolm W Nance, *The Terrorists of Iraq*, CRC Press; 1 edition (December 18, 2014), p 141

<sup>288</sup> Ibid p142



thousands of volunteers through the Syrian border. The Battle of Al Qaim (code-named Operation Matador)<sup>289</sup> in May 2005, lasted eleven days. US troops killed more than 125 suspected insurgents and captured 39. However, the Marines did not have sufficient numbers to set up a permanent garrison there. Consequently, as soon as they left, insurgents were back in town and re-established control over it. Regionally, the group tried to destabilise the Jordanian monarchy by conducting coordinated suicide bombings in Amman in October 2005.

Following the necessary Iraqiisation of the organisation in the eyes of the Iraqi public, AQI decided in December 2005 to form with seven smaller insurgent groups<sup>290</sup> an umbrella organisation called the Council of Consultation of the Mujahideen (*Majlis Shura Mujahideen, MSM*). Zarqawi was appointed chief of the government, and the position of the head of the committee was held by an Iraqi named Abdullah Rashid al-Baghdadi who was one of the many nicknames used by Abu Ali Al Anbari. Nevertheless, Zarqawi's leadership remained intact, and he stayed the real chief of the organisation by concentrating military and political power. At that point, the organisation was well established in the Iraqi Sunni heartland in its strongholds in Baghdad and Anbar. It gained prestige and became better structured and powerful with roughly 10 000 fighters<sup>291</sup>.

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<sup>289</sup> Knickmeyer, Ellen "Looking for Battle, Marines Find That Foes Have Fled-Hunt for Foreign Insurgents Proves Frustrating but Deadly", The Washington Post, 15 May 2005, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/15/AR2005051500785\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/15/AR2005051500785_pf.html)

<sup>290</sup> They were first 7, the number will grow to 12 Jaysh al-Ta'ifa al-Mansoura (The Army of the Victorious Sect), Jaysh Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaa'ah (The Army of the People of the Sunnah and the Community), Jama'at Jund al-Sahaba (The Soldiers of the Companions [of the Prophet] Group), Saraya al-Jihad al-Islami (The Islamic Jihad Legions), Saraya Fursan al-Tawhid (The Knights of Oneness of God Legions), Saraya Millat Ibrahim (The People of Abraham Legions), Kata'ib Kurdistan (The Kurdistan Battalions), Kata'ib al-Murabiteen (The steadfast Battalions), Kata'ib Ansar al-Tawhid (The Supporters of Tawhid Battalions), Kata'ib al-Tawhid wa al-Sunnah (The Tawhid and the Sunnah Battalions), Kata'ib al-Ahwal (The Atrocious Battalions), Kata'ib al-Ghurabaa' (The Strangers Battalions), in addition to a number of battalions from Jaysh al-Fatiheen (The Conquests Army), and some factions of the Islamic Army, Ansar al-Sunnah, and some battalions of Jaysh al-Mujahideen (The Mujahideen Army), Kata'ib Thawrat al-'Ishreen (The 1920 Revolution Brigade), and some units from the 'Asa'ib al-Iraq al-Jihadiyyah (The Iraqi Jihadi Squads).

<sup>291</sup> Ibid p31

The beginning of 2006 witnessed the rise of Zarqawi's group's influence in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar governorate, inhabited by roughly 400 000 inhabitants. In 2006, the insurgents destroyed every police station in the city on the same day. The local police were entirely neglected by the Anbaris, who were deterred from joining it. MSM's fighters were sufficiently confident to conduct armed parades in some streets of the city in February 2006<sup>292</sup>. Marine Col. Pete Devlin was the Chief Intelligence Officer for the Marine units operating in the province of Anbar. In August 2006, he published a report on the situation which was leaked to the Washington Post in mid-September 2006. He considered that MSM had evolved to be an "integral part of the social fabric of western Iraq"<sup>293</sup> and had become so powerful that U.S. forces no longer had the option "for a decapitating strike that would cripple the organisation"<sup>294</sup>. Boosted by its control of large parts of territories in al Qaim, Ramadi, and Baqubah, Zarqawi was about to declare an Islamic emirate three months before his death in June 2006.

### **Zarqawi and Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir's theological influence**

Zarqawi's strategy in Iraq followed Maqdissi's idea that the consolidation of power (*tamkeen*), achieved by fighting the "near enemy" (as opposed to Al-Qaeda's resolve to hit the "far enemy"), should be the prime objective. As noted earlier, Zarqawi's former prison companion believed that today's rulers in the Muslim world are apostates whose unbelief should be considered worse than that of the Jews and Christians, and must therefore be fought in priority<sup>295</sup>. Zarqawi always defended this idea against its Al-Qaeda interlocutors, insisting on the strategic necessity to not only fight the US presence in Iraq but also, and more importantly, to wage an all-out war against the "Crusaders" partners from the

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<sup>292</sup> Al Jazeera News report in Arabic, 2004, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5elo-2uFhBM>

<sup>293</sup> Bill Rogio, "Anbar, The Washington Post and the Devlin Report", Long War Journal, 28/11/2006 [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/11/anbar\\_the\\_washington.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/11/anbar_the_washington.php)

<sup>294</sup> *ibid*

<sup>295</sup> Wagemakers J., "A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad Al-Maqqdisi", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p289

Shia majority or rival Sunni groups. However, despite this agreement on fighting the “near enemy”, many differences between Zarqawi and Maqdisi persisted on ideological and methodological issues, which would eventually lead to a schism between the two old acquaintances. Abu Haniyeh and Abu Ruhman <sup>296</sup>maintain that after the first battle of Fallujah Zarqawi became heavily influenced at the religious jurisprudential level by another scholar, Sheikh Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir. He was an Egyptian veteran of the Afghan jihad with an exhaustive theological and literary heritage. Most of Zarqawi’s methodology, which would later become trademarks of the Islamic State’s methods, have indeed been theorised and religiously justified by al-Muhajir. Al-Muhajir’s book “Issues in the Jurisprudence of Jihad” (*Masa’il fi Fiqh al-Jihad*) truly provided the jurisprudential basis and “guidebook” for Islamic State’s actions. As a religious source, his frames of reference are found in the Qur’an, the Sunnah and the jurisprudential corpus of the Hanbali School, complemented by references to the religious teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayim Al Jawziya, and al-Wahhab. The book is divided into 12 chapters, each one treating an issue related to jihad and bearing the marks of the influence of these thinkers, but also making the extra step towards even more radical interpretations.

In the first one, al-Muhajir considers that entirely all the contemporary political systems fall into the state of “unbelief” (*kufr*) and “apostasy” (*ridda*), and must, therefore, be fought as they form together Dar Al-Harb. He also stresses the permissibility of using against this enemy all kind of weapons including non-conventional ones. Moreover, the blood of all the non-believers is considered as legal and permissible to spill unless they pay the *jizya* (the tax that would give them protection by the Muslims). When attacking them, the presence of Muslims (whom it is unlawful to kill) among them is not sufficient to prevent those attacks. While considered *nawazil* (calamities or momentous events), suicide operations are nonetheless allowed from a religious point of view<sup>297</sup>. Another discussion is dedicated to justifying beheading infidels, which Zarqawi will be the first to

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<sup>296</sup> Abu Haniyeh H., Abu Ruhman M., *The Islamic State Organization: The Sunni Organization and the Struggle for Global Jihadism*. Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jordan & Iraq, 2015, p75

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid* p 295

broadcast on the Internet in 2004 with the beheading of Nicholas Berg. Al-Maqdissi was very reluctant and called to use them only as an exceptional mean.

The dispute and ideological rift between Zarqawi and al-Maqdissi culminated in 2005 when Maqdissi published a letter to Zarqawi entitled “Al-Zarqawi: Advocacy and Advice, Hopes and Pains” (al-Zarqawi: Munasara wa Munasaha, Aamaal wa Aalaam), in which he expresses his reserves regarding the general takfir on the Shia, the extensive use of “martyrdom” operations, and Zarqawi’s very permissive rules of engagement. In 2006, Maqdissi’s criticisms expanded to all the doctrinal justifications based on the concept of “barricading” (tatarrus), which was defended by Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir and used to legitimise and exonerate civilian deaths as collateral damage if they happen to be present at a legitimate target. In sum, coupled with al-Muhajir’s influence, the process of “Iraqisation” of the Islamic State experienced after Zarqawi’s death in 2006 remove any further influence of al-Maqdissi on the group.

### [3-The management of savagery and Zarkawism as a strategy](#)

Regarding the ideological influences on the group, most of the literature on IS share the idea that the original book shaping its methodology and actions was “The Management of Savagery” written by Abu Bakr Naji<sup>298</sup>. Several sources<sup>299</sup> consider that the identity of Abu Bakr AL Naji would be an Egyptian Al Qaeda veteran from Afghanistan, Muhamad Khalil Al Haykamah who knew al-Zarqawi. The extent to which his book was influential to explain IS’ methodology is discussed. IS’ media in an issue of its official Magazine stated, “It is

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<sup>298</sup> Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad, the life of al Qaeda strategist Abu Musab al Suri*, Columbia University Press, 2008

<sup>299</sup> Brian H. Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, Yale University Press, 2017, p52

exaggerated to say that the book defined the methodology of the mujahidin”<sup>300</sup>. However, the same source from the organisation recognises that when al-Zarqawi read Abu Bakr Naji 100 pages, he commented: “it is as if the author knows what I am planning”<sup>301</sup>. Even though Al Naji’s book accurately describes the overall strategy of IS in Iraq, IS literature considers that AL Naji fell in some mistakes regarding the subject of cooperation with other groups who resist applying the Sharia fully. Abu Bakr Naji’s work consists of a strategical guidance destined for jihadi movements who are planning to destroy governments and build a new society. It outlines three stages for this struggle: disruption and exhaustion, management of savagery and empowerment. “Savagery” is the state of nature in an anarchical system where different factions struggle to take power. In this Hobbesian context where the “law of the jungle prevails”, the mujahedeen should apply his recommendations to manage this situation. It requires the management of the people’s need, providing security and defending borders, deterring the enemies, building a local intelligence network, co-opting local leaders and establishing coalitions. The most sensitive stage is considered to be the transitional phase between the second phase of building “*Shawkat al-Nikaya*” (the strength to vex and harm), and the final one of “*Shawkat al-Tamkeen*” (the strength to consolidate power and influence). The last important idea behind Naji’s vision is the use of violence, not as a tool limited to the war machine but as a means to a higher end. For Al Naji, the purpose of force is part of a broader movement of attraction and polarisation of society<sup>302</sup>.

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<sup>300</sup> *Dabiq* “The revival of Jihad in Bengal”, n.12,p.39, <http://jihadology.net/2015/11/18/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-12%E2%80%B3/>.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid

<sup>302</sup> Abu Bakr Al Naji , *The management of savagery* , translated by William MacCants John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies Harvard University, 2006, section 7 p 48 He develops this idea by adding that “ by polarization here , I mean dragging the masses into the battles such that polarization is created between the people. Thus one group of them will be with the side of the people of the truth, another group will go to the side of the people of falsehood and a third group will remain neutral; awaiting the outcome of the battle in order to join the victor. We must attract the sympathy of this group and make it hope for the victory of the people of faith.

According to Hassan Abu Haniyeh<sup>303</sup>, IS' Iraqi branch was influenced on a practical level by Abu Bakr Naji's theories especially regarding the governance of its controlled territory. Brian Fishman and Craig Whiteside<sup>304</sup> complete this idea by stating that Al Naji's strategic guidelines did not influence Zarqawi but rather codified and contextualised his practices and strategy. Zarqawi was portrayed as a rude personage lacking intellectual qualities in comparison to his mentor Al Maqdissi. In prison together, Maqdissi was the brain while Zarqawi was the muscles. However, contrary to this caricature portrait, Zarqawi developed a strategy and a vision that shaped part of the regional political landscape.

To fulfil his long-term goal of creating a caliphate, he envisioned from the start the creation, as soon as possible, of a conventional army in Iraq. Different from Al Naji's recommendations to start small and simple, he quickly aimed to instigate large signature attacks (Jordanian Embassy, UN headquarters, Bakr Al Hakim's assassination) to shake the basis of the Iraqi society and reshape it later. Zarqawi was aware of the potentiality of media coverage and what it could bring to his nascent group in terms of prestige against rival groups and capacity to attract recruits.

From a strategic perspective, "Zarkawism" is paradoxical in its manifestations. It is considered as a militarist ideology with a cult of violence considered as the pinnacle of faith. War is not only a means but also an end, because it is conceived as a form of worship at the individual level. In a sense, Clausewitz's vision of war as a "slaughter", where one should always strike the enemy where he was strongest and that "blood is the price of victory" echoed Zarqawi's cult of sacrifice and offence. Added to this vision, his Manichean vision considered that all the states on Earth were "Tawagheet" that must be fought. However, as a strategist,

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<sup>303</sup> Hassan Abu Hanieh and Dr Mohamed Abu Ruhman, *The Islamic State organization : the Sunni Organization and the struggle for Global Jihadism*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015. Amman p 143  
URL : <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/11458.pdf>

<sup>304</sup> , Brian Fishman , *The Master Plan, The Master Plan ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* , Yale University Press, 2017, p 39

Zarqawi had an early awareness of the imbalance of power facing the US and the impossibility of confronting it.

In a sense, the targeting of the Shia community and its civilians was an indirect way to disrupt US' project in Iraq by creating enough chaos to impede the success of Iraqi state building. A document found by US troops in 2006 suggested that Zarqawi was also thinking of igniting conflict between the US and Iran by finding ways to "entangle the American forces into another war against another country" and "exaggerate the Iranian danger and to convince America, and the West in general, of the real danger coming from Iran".<sup>305</sup>

The other idea shared in Zarqawi's and Al Naji's vision of violence is its potential as a catalyst that encourages mobilisation. Zarqawi believed that armed mobilisation and the targeting of the Shia community for its collaboration with the US would mobilise disaffected Sunnis and raise among them a "Sunni Consciousness". Unlike other insurgent groups, Zarqawi did not limit its actions to guerrilla warfare against the US but opted to ignite sectarian tensions and grasp the fruit from the polarisation effect described by Al Naji. His strategy was also "unrestricted" in terms of range of target and resources allocated.

Guerrilla theorists such as Guevara and Regis Debray argued that insurgents should skip the political mobilisation process of guerrilla warfare and immediately use violence. "Focoism" refers to the idea that the use of violence itself can mobilise the targeted population. The traditional guerrilla strategy considers that before starting a military campaign, careful recruitment and education of population awareness is necessary before taking arms. Focoism reverses this assumption; the military conflict itself can help mobilise the local population. Violence becomes the catalyst since its consequences would motivate recruits for a guerrilla strategy. However, the difference and peculiarity of Zarqawi's focoism is the combination with a punishment strategy and the goal of purging the society from apostates.

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<sup>305</sup> Cesar Soriano, "Iraqi leaders: Memo details al-Qaeda plans", USA today, 6/15/2006, [https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2006-06-15-raid-blueprint\\_x.htm](https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2006-06-15-raid-blueprint_x.htm)

Zarqawi ultimately forced Al Qaeda's central command not only to recognise him but also to submit to his strategy of focusing on Iraq's Shias. His violence against them was, according to him, a way to show their real intention, which they dissimulated as part of their dissimulation techniques, called "*Taqiya*".<sup>306</sup> His first argument against them was political by developing a Shia-centred explanation of Islamic defeats in history: Shia treason was the reason for the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols or the failure of the Vienna Siege by the Ottomans that would have spread Islam to Western Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He also warned Al Qaeda central of the danger of Shia imperialism in the Middle East that could take over the region. His anti-Iranian statements, accusing them of allying themselves with the US and being the worst enemies of the Sunni, would act as a self-fulfilling prophecy for the group's supporters who interpreted Iran's Nuclear Deal of 2013 or the coalition air support to Shia militias in 2015 as a confirmation of Zarqawi's predictions. Iranian expansionism has given the group a long-term *raison d'être* that the US departure from Iraq would have put an end to. Moreover, the focus on Iran's role and the so-called "Safavid conspiracy" became mainstream a decade later and was adopted by a broad fringe of disaffected Sunnis, not only from Iraq but from the whole region.

The generation of a polarisation effect with mass violence attempted by Zarqawi in Jordan failed utterly in contrast to the one in Iraq. For him, the triple suicide bombings that hit Amman in November 2005 represented a personal achievement of having targeted his most hated enemy, the Jordanian monarchy. However, the operation which targeted civilians in the hotels of Amman did not achieve any "polarisation" effect but rather a rejection effect from the same people he wanted to attract through this attack, the Jordanian people. A few days after, Al Qaeda's number three, Atiyah Abu Abdurrahman, wrote to Zarqawi explaining

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<sup>306</sup> Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi, "Riasala min Abi Mus'ab al-Zarqawi ila al-Shaikh Osama bin Laden (Hafithahu Allah)" (Lit., Letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Sheikh Osama bin Laden, May God Protect Him), [In Arabic], dated February 15, 2004. See, "Majmou' Rasa'il al-Zarqawi" (Lit., A Collection of Al-Zarqawi's letters),



to him that “Policy must be dominant over militarism”<sup>307</sup> and ordering him to stop launching operations outside Iraq without Al Qaeda’s permission. This operation, even though it was a tactical victory, resulted in a strategic and political defeat for him, which Zarqawi lamented afterwards.<sup>308</sup>

Other than igniting a sectarian war in Iraq or trying to destabilise the region, Zarqawi’s use of violence in Iraq had several other strategic objectives. First, the guerrilla movement aimed to kill as many US soldiers as possible to create the necessary political pressure to shift US policy and force a US withdrawal from the country. Attacks were carried out to send political messages and show the Iraqi Government’s inability to maintain order or undermine their legitimacy during election days. Other attacks were carried out and mediatised as an act of revenge for tragic events such as the rape and murder of an Iraqi girl by US soldiers, torture cases in Abu Ghraib or the stoning of a Yazidi girl converted to Islam. As described by Malcolm W Nance, Zarqawi was aware of the use of female Marines to search female residents in Fallujah. He decided to strike them with SVBIEDs to take the credit of the propaganda effect of such operations in the eyes of the local population<sup>309</sup>. Zarqawi framed his operations to the Sunni community as retaliation in their name. Targets were selected carefully to create the polarisation effect and deliver a political message: Shia religious leaders, Shia mosques, female US Marines, and the Yezidi Community. Government’s collaborators were targeted to deter the population from participating in elections. This resulted in a de facto Sunni boycott of the 2005 elections that further alienated the Sunnis politically. This strategy grew to include tribal figures that failed to cooperate, which in turn sparked a growing tribal counter-movement that was angry at the violation of tribal customs. All these attacks were also designed to produce a disproportionate and violent reaction from Iraqi authorities, the US army and Shia militias.

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<sup>307</sup> Brian Fishman , *The Master Plan, The Master Plan ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, Yale University Press, 2017, p77

<sup>308</sup> Joby Warrick, *The rise of The Black Flags*, Bantam Press, 2015, p 200

<sup>309</sup> Malcolm W Nance, *the Terrorists of Iraq* , CRC Press; 2005, p326

#### *4- The Islamic State of Iraq from the proclamation in 2006 to near strategic defeat in 2010*

##### **The declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq and the final maturation of IS' ideology**

At the moment of Zarqawi's death in June 2006, according to his successor Abu Hamza Muhajir, the group was said to have lost 4000 foreign fighters after three years of combat.<sup>310</sup> Nevertheless, it maintained its activities and as predicted by the Devlin report, was able to remain resilient after the loss of its charismatic leader. However, its presence in Baqubah, in Diyala province and not in Anbar, was nonetheless proof that the group began to see the region as not sufficiently secure. Three months after Zarqawi's death, his followers fulfilled his expectations of creating an Islamic state, and on October 12<sup>th</sup> 2006 announced the formation of "Hilf al-Mutayibeen" (The Pact of the Perfumed Ones), a coalition of movements, organizations, and groups that fall under the framework of the "Mujahideen Shura Council," in addition to a number of Sunni tribal leaders. Three days later, Muharib al-Jabouri, Spokesman of the Islamic State of Iraq, and Minister of Media announced its establishment on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2006, which covered, in theory, the following provinces: Anbar, Kirkuk, Nineveh, Diyala, Salahuddin, Babil, and Wasit. This announcement by ISI leaders came as a separatist solution proposed to Sunnis dissatisfied by the new share of power in the Iraqi state. Indeed, just a few days before, an Iraqi law adopted at parliament in favour of federalism disappointed most the Sunnis of Iraq.

Abu Omar al-Baghdadi became ISI's chief and the Emir of the Believers. He was vouched for to Osama bin Laden by -Zarqawi, and later by Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, who became the successor of Zarqawi in AQI and the only non-Iraqi minister of ISI's government with the position of War Minister. For the first time, the rank of political leader and supreme military commander was divided, and this new structure of power would prevail in the group. At that time, the group announced

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<sup>310</sup>"The Muhajir Audiotape", The long war journal , 28/09/2006 , [www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/09/the\\_muhajir\\_almasri.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/09/the_muhajir_almasri.php)

the creation of its media wing, Al Furqan. It successfully mirrored its structuration with the attributes of a state structure. For that purpose, it formed ministries and appointed “*Walis*” (provincial governors) in the regions under its control. This declaration was risky; after its setbacks in 2008, to stress the contrast between its aspirations and the reality on the ground, its detractors mocked the Islamic State as “Dawla al Cartoniya”, the “Paper State”. After the proclamation of the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006, the group gained in autonomy from the Al Qaeda central leadership from an organisational, structural and ideological point of view. It is known today that Al Qaeda’s leadership was caught by surprise by the dissolution of its branch of Iraq in the newly created Islamic State. Despite this misunderstanding, Bin Laden and Zawahiri publicly endorsed the establishment of “this legitimate emirate”<sup>311</sup>. Confronted with criticism coming from other Iraqi Sunni groups regarding its methodology, in 2007 the group issued an explicit declaration presenting its doctrine through a speech of its leader Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. He proclaimed his adherence to Sunni Salafi theological methodology and appealed to all Sunnis, and the young men of jihadi-salafism in particular, across the entire world. He later enumerated several points forming the basis of the group’s doctrinal reference.

First, he proclaimed the necessity to remove and destroy all signs of “idolatry” and innovation. He declared as apostate the Shias, the magicians and the tomb worshippers (in other words the Sufis) and all the people who insulted the Prophet of Islam and his companions. At the same time, however, he distanced himself from the accusation of Kharijism by stressing the fact that the group did not excommunicate from Islam Muslims who commit sins such as stealing, adultery and consuming alcohol. From that day, the group has always tried to position its discourse in the middle ground between the excesses of Khawarij extremism and the laxism of Irja people who separate faith from actions.

Second, from a political point of view, the Sharia is claimed to be the only law used in resolving disputes and prevailing above all man-made or tribal laws. Other ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, communism and Baathism are

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<sup>311</sup> William McCants , *The ISIS Apocalypse*, St Martin’s Press, Washington, 2015, p19

presented as apostasy from Islam. Jihadi groups in Iraq are not considered as disbelievers; instead, they are considered to be in a state of disobedience because they do not work for unity. Borders inherited from the post-colonial period are regarded as illegitimate. The only accepted methodology to change the status quo is through jihad, understood as a military manoeuvre and as a compulsory duty for all Muslims. Following Azzam's guidelines on jihad, Muslim lands have to be defended from foreign aggression while the territories which were once governed by Sharia should be reconquered. The organisation also vowed to fight the US occupation and the Iranian presence in Iraq.

Regarding the group's legitimate targets, all countries ruled by human-made laws (and where Islam rules come second) are considered as Dar al-Kufr and have to be fought. Their leaders, their security apparatus and their functionaries, are legitimate targets. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all the population is considered as disbelievers. However, in all the Islamic countries, Christians and Jews are all considered in a state of war because they do not pay the *Jizya*. These ideological foundations presented by the leader of ISI in 2007 did not change in the year following this announcement and have remained the same ever since that time.

### **The erosion of the group's power from 2007 to 2010 in Sunni provinces**

#### **Anbar**

The group's popular support began to erode in Anbar despite its new strategy of Iraqiisation, which proposed to the Sunnis of Iraq an alternative secessionist model. In September of 2006, a coalition of 17 tribal sheikhs led by Sattar Abu Risha, announced the formation in Ramadi of the Anbar Awakening Council (Sahawat Movement)<sup>312</sup>. The irruption of this new actor increased the

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<sup>312</sup> I decided to use this term which is the Arabic translation of the word Awakening because it used by all the actors to name this movement, and because this term has been used in IS' rhetoric to depict the Sunni rebels or Tribal leader against them.

level of violence in Ramadi from July 2006 to April 2007. It was the peak of ISI's capability in the city and the region with an average of 70 attacks per day<sup>313</sup>. Against five US battalions and the Iraqi Army, ISI in Ramadi was still able to conduct raids and control some neighbourhoods.

The academic debate regarding the cause of ISI's destruction in Anbar shows that compared to the Sahawat, the impact of the US surge was minimal in Anbar since fresh troops were mostly deployed in Baghdad and its belt<sup>314</sup>. ISI launched a campaign of systematic elimination of Sahawat leaders, with the killing after 11 failed attempts of its founding leader Sattar Abu Risha in September of 2007<sup>315</sup>. However, this campaign did not prevent tribal groups from joining the Sahawat and closely working with the US coalition and the Iraqi Government. What changed the course of the battle was the enrolment into the local police of thousands of tribesmen and defectors from other Sunni rebellion groups. To explain how this turned the balance of power in Al Anbar province so swiftly, 30 000 new police recruits from the grassroots tribes of Anbar began to support the US troops. Tribal leaders were offered millions of dollars from CERP projects (commander's emergency response program)<sup>316</sup> in exchange for the adherence of their tribesmen to the police and their valuable local intelligence resources regarding ISI members. In Ramadi alone, the US coalition spent 10 million dollars from August 2006 to March 2007. Consequently, the local police were much more efficient than the Iraqi Army against ISI members. The group never tried to find a compromise or a settled solution with the tribes. On the contrary, it confronted them with all its firepower and prioritised their targeting over other enemies. The Sahawat movement began to grow in number and attracted another 40 Sunni

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<sup>313</sup>Carter Malkasian, *Illusion of victory : the Anbar Awakening and the rise of the Islamic State*, Oxford university Press, 2017, p98

<sup>314</sup>SM McClure, *The lost caravan: The rise and Fall of Al Qaeda in Iraq 2003-2007*, 2010, <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/5247>

<sup>315</sup>"Iraqi insurgents kill key US ally", BBC, September 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/6993211.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6993211.stm)

<sup>316</sup> Carter Malkasian, *Illusion of victory : the Anbar Awakening and the rise of the Islamic State*, Oxford university Press, 2017

tribes from Al Anbar whose leaders were paid and armed by the US. Not all the tribesmen were part of the movement, but Abu Risha succeeded in joining all the major tribes of Anbar<sup>317</sup>. An emir of the group in Anbar wrote<sup>318</sup> in mid-2007 that the group was facing an extraordinary crisis in Anbar; civilians were reluctant to help ISI fighters fearing the Sahawat and the group began to be overwhelmed by the number of enemies. While ISI troops' morale was falling, the group began to use indiscriminate violence, targeting civilians from the tribes involved in the Sahawat. This peak of brutality hastened the backfire from the rest of the civilian population. ISI's fighters and leaders retreated from Ramadi on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2007, its last urban stronghold in Anbar. The overall violence in the governorate decreased dramatically throughout the year of 2007 from 1500 deaths in October 2006 to less than 200 a year after.<sup>319</sup>

ISI also experienced a vital blow regarding its recruitment network in the region of Al Qaim with the capture in October of 2008 of Abu Ghadiya.<sup>320</sup> He was its chief coordinator between Syria and Iraq. Al Qaim was the main crossing point into Iraq for fighters, money, and equipment in support of the group's structure. Abu Ghadiya was present in the town of Zabadani in Syria and had a bureau in Deir Ezzor and Al A'aquidat to transport with the help of contraband tribal network fighters to Iraq. Among his team was another Syrian from Idlib, Abu Mohamed al Adnani, who would be the group's official spokesperson in 2010 and who had a crucial role in the organisation. The attack on Al Bukamal by US Marines on the Syrian side of the border and Abu Ghadiya's arrest disrupted the flow of fighters coming from the crossing point. The operation was the last major one conducted

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<sup>317</sup>Among them the most powerful and influential tribes the Albu Asaf, Albu Alwan, Albu Fahad, Albu ghanem, Albu Maria.

<sup>318</sup> The Sahawat Movement began to grow in number and attracted 40 Sunni tribes from Al Anbar whose leader were paid and armed by the US.

<sup>319</sup> Johnston, Patrick B., Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick Ryan and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016, p 34 [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1192.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1192.html)

<sup>320</sup> His name was Badran Ashaabani.

by the US army in Anbar Province. The years of 2008 and 2009 witnessed not one operation of the US Marines in Anbar. The group was defeated in the province and retreated from cities. However, it maintained its profile by orchestrating a series of attacks during that period. In April 2008, following a call of Abu Hamza Al Muhajir<sup>321</sup> to carry out attacks in the whole country, more than eight attacks were orchestrated in Ramadi, Al Qaim and Fallujah using car bombs and suicide belts targeting the local police and US Marines, resulting in the killing of nearly 60 people. Despite these attempts to cause chaos, the 2009 elections were a success in Anbar, unlike in 2005, with massive participation.

On October 6<sup>th</sup> 2009, the last two Marine regiments stationed in the province ended their presence in the cities of the governorate as part of the US withdrawal plan from the region. On August 31<sup>th</sup> 2010, the US declared the end of combat operations and transferred its last base in Anbar, the Ayn Al Asad base, to the Iraqi Government. To express their joy, hundreds of Fallujah residents<sup>322</sup> celebrated the pull-out by burning American flags in the city. During this period of restructuration of US forces in Al Anbar, ISI's campaign of bombing rebounded in strength by November 2009. Throughout the last months of the year, additional attacks, mainly assassinations, were carried out in Ramadi targeting reconciliation meetings or local figures.<sup>323</sup>

## Diyala

Zarqawi's first media appearance was geo-localized in the village of Hibhib<sup>324</sup> located northwest of Baqubah along the Baghdad-Kirkuk road, which

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<sup>321</sup> "Al-Qaeda in Iraq calls for one-month offensive", CBS news, April 19 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/al-qaeda-in-iraq-calls-for-one-month-offensive-1.714828?ref=rss>

<sup>322</sup>, "Hundreds in Fallujah burn U.S. flag to celebrate troops pulling out of Iraq," AFP, December 14, 2011, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/hundreds-in-fallujah-burn-u-s-flag-to-celebrate-troops-pulling-out-of-iraq>

<sup>323</sup> Marc Santora, "Attacks Threaten Fragile Security Gains in Cradle of Iraq Insurgency" , New York Times 17/11/2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/17/world/middleeast/17anbar.html>

<sup>324</sup> Joby Warrick, *The rise of The Black Flags*, Bantam Press 2015, p215

showed that during the first months of 2006 the region was considered by him to be safe. In that same area, his safe house was blown up by two American F-16 fighter jets on 8<sup>th</sup> June of 2006. However, even after his death, AQI continued to use Diyala as a staging ground and potential capital. As described in the previous section, Anbar witnessed a steady decline in violence throughout the year of 2007. This coincided with a rise of violence in the province of Diyala, where ISI attacked coalition forces, ISF and other groups. There was a pre-existing trend of Sunni militant actions before 2006, however, throughout that year, the number of violent incidents per month was multiplied by five from 100 per month to nearly 500<sup>325</sup>. On the ground, the ISI significantly increased the targeting of the Shia minority to provoke sectarian tensions. Progressively, they were controlling Baqubah with the help of Shia militias such as the Wolf and Badr Brigades and the Mahdi Army<sup>326</sup>. At the same time, the government was dysfunctional in Diyala and failed in providing even the most basic services to the local population. The Iraqi police withdrew from Buhriz, the area just south of Baqubah, in November 2006. Amidst the state of chaos, ISI proclaimed the city of Baqubah and much of Diyala Province as part of its new proclaimed state. In reaction to this situation, the US launched an anti-insurgency campaign in the province. From June to November 2007, three successive, large-scale military operations were carried out: Operation “Thunder Phantom” in June followed by Operation “Phantom Strike” in August and “Raider Reaper” in November<sup>327</sup>. The three operations concentrated nearly 10,000 U.S. and Iraqi troops in Diyala Province to take the city of Baqubah and clear the surrounding areas from ISI’s presence. It began on June 19, 2007, when 300 to 500 insurgents were occupying the western neighbourhoods of Baqubah<sup>328</sup>. The first operation resulted in the killing or

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<sup>325</sup> Michael Knights, “Pursuing Al-Qa`ida into Diyala Province”, CTC Sentinel, Vol1, Issue 9 , August 2008, p1

<sup>326</sup> Kimberly Kagan , “Securing Diyala” , Iraq Report 4, Institute for the Study of War, June 2007 p4

<sup>327</sup> Jessica Lewis, “The Islamic State of Iraq Returns to Diyala”, Middle East Security Report 18, April 2014, p8

<sup>328</sup> Boshua, Partlow, ”Troops Take Embattled Baqubah Bit by Bit, U.S. Commander Says”, Washington Post, Tuesday, June 26, 2007



capture of roughly 150 insurgents. However, almost 80 per cent of ISI fighters in Baqubah escaped from the city before the beginning of combat operations.<sup>329</sup> ISI fighters dispersed into their safe havens outside the city such as Khalis, Muqdadiyah or Khan Bani Sa'ad.

At the same time, a process of reconciliation between Sunni and Shia tribes brokered by the US started in July 2007. This initiative paved the way for the formation of a local version of the Sahawat movement. On August 19<sup>th</sup>, more than 100 tribal leaders from the Diyala River Valley met and decided to cooperate against ISI. This cooperation took shape in Muqdadiyah, where 675 residents participated in the "concerned local citizens group" and assisted US forces in identifying weapon caches in the city.<sup>330</sup> By the summer of 2008, ISI was unable to launch complex urban attacks and could only hold public rallies in rural villages. In Baqubah, 2032 citizens joined the concerned local citizen groups called "the Baqubah Guardians". Some of the former insurgent groups, such as the 1920s Revolution Brigades, also participated in those local groups<sup>331</sup>. In total, the Diyala security operations between 2007 and 2009 saw the participation of a myriad of forces against the ISI with the 10-battalion of the Iraqi Army garrison of Diyala, reinforcements from the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi National Police and three US brigades supported by local tribal groups. The continued presence of US troops collaborating with the Iraqis and "concerned local citizens" prevented the organisation from re-establishing itself in urban areas.

ISI attempted to reconstitute multiple times in the province, and on occasions succeeded in conducting complex attacks such as the one against tribal reconciliation meetings in June 2007. Nevertheless, its fragmentation into small groups scattered in the region meant that its attacks were less complex, taking place at longer intervals, with decreasing success. However, despite those

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<sup>329</sup> John F. Burns, "Militants Said to Flee Before U.S. Offensive", *New York Times*, June 23, 2007

<sup>330</sup> Kimberly Kagan, "Securing Diyala", *Iraq Report 7*, Institute for the Study of War, June 2007, p19

<sup>331</sup> *ibid* p21

setbacks, the group was able to be resilient. Olive Group's database of more than 100,000 geo-located incidents in Iraq suggests that reported incidents decreased from 539 in January 2007 to 252 in July 2008 in Diyala Province<sup>332</sup>. These incidents very likely took place in the remaining areas where ISI had sufficient operational space. This was the case on the farmland of Balad Ruz district and Hamrin Mountain. Those areas situated in the north represented an important line of retreat and reinforcement, linking Diyala to other vital areas such as Hamrin Lake, Tuz Khurmatu, Hawijah and Baiji.

## **Baghdad**

In the aftermath of the February 2006 explosion at the Samarra mosque, one of the holiest places of Shiism in Iraq, the unrest in Iraq mutated into a sectarian civil war. Although the group did not claim responsibility for the operation, the Iraqi authorities imputed it to AQI. Within hours of the bombing, Shia militias attacked 30 Sunni mosques in retaliation and death squads in Baghdad killed more than 600 Sunnis during the following months<sup>333</sup>. In January 2007, ISI presented with a plan<sup>334</sup> to defend the capital and unite the Sunni armed groups. It proposed a joint Sunni insurgent and civilian militias structure to protect the Sunni neighbourhood. Locals were to defend their areas while Sunni insurgent groups waged offensive actions. However, new frictions with other armed groups and particularly the Islamic Army in Iraq appeared and caused infighting between them. The US and the Iraqi Army began to launch massive operations to uproot the insurgency from the capital. The first operation of stabilisation began in May 2006 with the arrival of Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki. Despite the deployment of two US brigades, followed by two others in August supported by 50 000 Iraqi soldiers and police officers, the situation remained dire.

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<sup>332</sup> Michael Knights, "Pursuing Al-Qa'ida into Diyala Province", CTC Sentinel, August 2008, Vol 1, Issue 9

<sup>333</sup> Stephen, Friedman, Jeffrey A. and Jacob Shapiro, "Testing the Surge", International Security, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2012 pp.7-40.

<sup>334</sup> Khatta al defa' aan baghdas , «Dawlat al iraq al islamiya lil nashr al sari" lit the Baghdad defense plan, ISI quick distribution, 7/01/2007 alfoja.com

Coordination between ISF and US forces was weak, and the local police were considered unreliable. On 4<sup>th</sup> November 2006, simultaneous attacks imputed to ISI killed 202 people and injured 200 others in the neighbourhood of Sadr city. More than 100 US soldiers and 200 Iraqi forces were killed during this first operation<sup>335</sup>. Between December 2006 and February 2007, the US command decided on a new approach with the so-called “surge” by adding 20 000 more US soldiers as part of the new plan of securing the city. At the same time, a cease-fire between the Iraqi Government and the Mahdi Army was reached. The coalition would concentrate its efforts in the capital only against ISI.

The second operation, named *Fardh al-Qanoon*, or the “Baghdad Security Plan”, started on 13<sup>th</sup> of February 2007 and was dominated by the Iraqi Army with 18 brigades of 50 000 men while the US gathered ten brigades for 35 000 troops. Nonetheless, with roughly one member of the security forces per 50 citizens, the number of troops deployed remained insufficient. This problem was resolved with the critical support of Sahawat groups from the Sunni tribes in the city. The support of local groups, which were part of the Iraqi insurgency, was essential to take control of a neighbourhood cleared by US operations and Iraqi forces. The combination of these forces enabled a unified US-Iraqi centre commandment to be put in place in each of the nine security districts and a network of 75 Joint Security Stations or Combat Outposts. Baghdad was cut from the rest of the country; three brigades established themselves in the south to avoid any communications between the belts. An intelligence breakout is said to have helped the US and Iraqi forces in their operations. They discovered a plan of the city drawn by Zarqawi himself<sup>336</sup>. This offered them an insight into the group's methods for moving explosives, fighters and money into Baghdad. The result of

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<sup>335</sup> CDEF/DREX/Col Goya, « La stabilisation d'une mégapole : Baghdad (2006-2008) », p3 [http://www.cdef.terre.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/5108/69704/file/15\\_stabilisation\\_bagdad.pdf](http://www.cdef.terre.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/5108/69704/file/15_stabilisation_bagdad.pdf)

<sup>336</sup> According to Maj. Gen. Bob Scales “The map essentially laid out how Al Qaeda controlled Baghdad. And they did it through four belts that surrounded the city, and these belts controlled access to the city for reinforcements and weapons and money”. “Plan of Baghdad attributed to Zarqawi”, Fox News, 2006 [http://www.foxnews.com/projects/pdf/Baghdad\\_Belt.pdf](http://www.foxnews.com/projects/pdf/Baghdad_Belt.pdf)

the operation was the elimination or arrest of 8000 insurgents mostly belonging to the ISI and the destruction of weapons caches. In August, “Phantom Thunder” was followed by “Phantom Strike”, which targeted the group from the northern Baghdad belt to Diyala Province. To counter this offensive, ISI multiplied attacks against the Shia, the government and the coalition. On 12<sup>th</sup> February, the market of Chorja, crowded with Shia citizens, was attacked and in April 2007, 190 people were killed in the neighbourhood of Sadriyah.

The month of June 2009 saw the withdrawal of the US forces from the cities. This new situation meant for ISI a fall of the pressure in Baghdad. Three waves of attacks in April, August and November 2009 against sensitive and symbolic targets showed the renewed capacities of the group to mount multiple simultaneous attacks in the capital. On April 6<sup>th</sup>, simultaneous car bomb attacks hit the sector of Sadr city killing 32<sup>337</sup>. In August, on the anniversary day of the attack on the UN compound in 2003, the Ministry of Finance of Foreign Affairs, the Green Zone and the Iraqi Army were hit by a powerful truck and car bombs, leaving 100 dead and 500 injured. A few months later in October, in the same area, the Minister of Justice was attacked by another truck bomb, leaving 150 dead and 800 injured. This month was the deadliest month in the capital since 2007.

## **Salahudeen**

Under growing pressure from US forces, ISF, the Sahawat and Shia militias in Anbar, Baghdad and Diyala, ISI retreated to Salahudeen in 2008. The Salahudeen Governorate, situated north of Baghdad, has 1.5 million inhabitants, most of them Sunnis. The governorate has two important cities: its capital Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam Hussein, and Samarra, home of the Al-Askari Shrine, the third-holiest religious site in Shia Islam. With several pockets of Shia-controlled cities (such as in Balad and Ad Dujayl) and the presence of shrines, it had some of the same potentials for sectarian conflict as Diyala. The governorate of Salahudeen had all the attributes of a hub for logistical routes and a potential

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<sup>337</sup> “Deadly car bombs hit Baghdad”, Al Jazeera, 04/2009  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2009/04/20094681326944727.html>

haven. The majority of the Sunni population were against the US coalition and had many resentments towards the Shia-controlled government. As in Diyala, the provincial government was weak, dysfunctional and considered as illegitimate by the population. This, added to the limited presence of US and Iraqi forces, resulted in ISI making significant attacks in the region in mid-2007, making the governorate the second most violent place in Iraq behind Anbar<sup>338</sup>.

In February 2006, Majliss Shura Mujahedeen was believed to have conducted one of its most successful attacks of the entire conflict, targeting the symbolic Al-Askari mosque. On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2006, explosions occurred at the Shrine destroying its golden dome. Earlier, several men wearing a military uniform had entered the mosque, tied up the guards there and set explosives, resulting in the blast. Curiously, despite the prestige in attacking such a holy place for the Shia community the group never claimed responsibility for the attack<sup>339</sup>. This could have been part of its strategy of deception in order to create disorder and chaos among the Iraqi community. Some Sunnis accused Maliki of having committed a False Flag attack to target them; others considered the Americans to be behind it to disunite the Iraqi resistance while Shia militants imputed it to the whole Sunni community in order to advance their sectarian agenda. After conducting a series of kidnappings and murders targeting Shia workers from the majority-Shia town of Balad in October 2006, riots and sectarian violence spread in the province.<sup>340</sup>

In 2007, coalition forces attempted to build on the successes of the Sahawat in Anbar by engaging more directly with Sunni tribal leaders in Salahudeen. By mid-2007, leaders from the Juburi tribe began to join forces with local Iraqi Police

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<sup>338</sup> Johnston, Patrick B., Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick Ryan and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016, [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1192.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1192.html), p 38

<sup>339</sup> Craig Whiteside, "Smiling, Scented Men: the political worldview of the Islamic State of Iraq 2003-2013", PhD thesis ,2014, [https://research.libraries.wsu.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2376/5421/Whiteside\\_wsu\\_0251E\\_11248.pdf](https://research.libraries.wsu.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2376/5421/Whiteside_wsu_0251E_11248.pdf), p104

<sup>340</sup>"Revenge attacks grip town north of Baghdad", The Irish Time, 15/10/2006 <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/revenge-attacks-grip-town-north-of-baghdad-1.798009>

elements to fight against ISI in Dhuluiyah, a former ISI stronghold.<sup>341</sup> In May, tribal leaders gathered in Taji and announced the establishment of an alliance to combat ISI. This experience was replicated in the rest of the governorates in Balad, Samarra, Tarmiyah, and Baiji, resulting in a reduction in ISI's operational capacity. By the end of 2007, throughout Iraq, the number of the group's fighters was decimated by over 70 per cent from 12,000 to 3,500.<sup>342</sup> At the same, 91 000 fighters from the Sons of Iraq Program of Sunni tribes were actively cooperating with US forces in Anbar, Baghdad Diyala and Salahudeen.

## **Nineveh**

With the group being under significant pressure in Anbar, Diyala and Salahudeen, it started to shift its centre of gravity to northern Iraq and the region of Nineveh. Because of its complex ethno-sectarian composition and geographical position close to Syria, ISI could count on significant Sunni popular support. This granted the group an essential flow of financial revenue coming from its capital Mosul and its 2 million inhabitants. Back in 2005, the city of Tel Afar quickly transformed into an AQI stronghold. The US coalition had to launch a battle in September to take the city back from AQI militants. Operation Restoring Rights<sup>343</sup> was the most massive operation since Fallujah in 2004, mobilising about 5,000 US and Iraqi infantry. Despite its success, the city remained a source of tension and violence because of the presence of a Shia minority in a Sunni region. From 2006 to 2007, the level of activity and violence in the province was low compared to the areas in central Iraq. Only 1000 US soldiers and 6500 ISF troops and police officers were sufficient to secure the city.

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<sup>341</sup> Bill Roggio, "Iraq Report: The Salahadin Awakening Forms," The Long War Journal, May 21, 2007, [https://www.longwarjournal.org/dailyiraqreport/2007/05/iraq\\_report\\_the\\_salahadin\\_awk.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/dailyiraqreport/2007/05/iraq_report_the_salahadin_awk.php)

<sup>342</sup> Farooq Ahmed, "Backgrounder #23: Sons of Iraq and Awakening Forces", Institute for the Study of War, Washington, D.C., Feb. 21, 2008, pp.2-5. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/reports/Backgrounder%2023%20Sons%20of%20Iraq%20and%20Awakening%20Forces.pdf>

<sup>343</sup> Bill Rogio "Operation Restoring Rights in Tal Afar", Long war journal, September 5th, 2005, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2005/09/operation\\_resto.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2005/09/operation_resto.php)

During that time, the coalition's and ISI's efforts were turned to win the battle in central Iraq. In December 2006, there was an average of 15-18 attacks a day in Nineveh Province.<sup>344</sup> In March 2007, this number fell to 10-13 attacks a day. By July, it had fallen further to 7-9 attacks.

Nevertheless, the governorate progressively became ISI's last urban stronghold as many of its top leaders were based there. Coalition intelligence officers believed that 400 to 600 fighters were operating in the city and that 1,200 to 1,600 nationalist insurgents and other individuals could cooperate with them<sup>345</sup>. Abu Hamza al-Muhajir was reportedly in the region; Mohamed MouMou, a Moroccan Swedish commander, known as Abu Qasrawah<sup>346</sup> was his second deputy and was also in the city until Muhajir's death. ISI was able to carry out spectacular attacks, demonstrating a high operational capability such as in May 2007 when 200 armed militants attacked the central provincial jail, Badoush Prison, using 6 VBIEDs. In August 2007, several massive VBIEDs targeted Yezidi villages in Sinjar, killing 344 people and injuring more than 700.<sup>347</sup> In 2008, the number of violent attacks in the governorate surpassed those in the other provinces in Iraq<sup>348</sup>.

In January 2008, the explosion of a weapons cache in an ISI safe house in Mosul accidentally killed and wounded 200 people<sup>349</sup>. The day after, a suicide bomber killed the Nineveh provincial police chief, who was inspecting the area. This event

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<sup>344</sup> Eric Hamilton, "The Fight for Mosul March 2003 March 2008", the Institute for Study of War, Iraq Report 8, p10

<sup>345</sup> Ibid

<sup>346</sup> Kyle Orton, "Mohamed Moumou Islamic State commander of the North", 28/05/2017, <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2017/01/28/mohamed-moumou-islamic-states-commander-of-the-north/#more-3510>

<sup>347</sup> Damien Cave and James Glanz, "Toll Rises Above 500 in Iraq Bombings", New York Times, 22 08/2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/22/world/middleeast/22iraq.html>

<sup>348</sup> Johnston, Patrick B., Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick Ryan and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1192.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1192.html), p 40

<sup>349</sup> Eric Hamilton, "The Fight for Mosul March 2003 March 2008", Iraq Report 8, the Institute for Study of War, p1

pushed PM Al Maliki to launch a military campaign in order to cleanse the city from the Sunni insurgency. Attacks in Mosul declined from an average of 40 a day in the week before the official launch of operations to between four and six a day in the weeks after, a roughly 85% decrease in attacks. By early 2009, primarily because of increasingly active joint counterterrorism operations, ISI was weakened in Nineveh. However, the group's leader managed to escape to the Jazira desert and find shelter in vast remote areas. In contrast to other provinces, the Sahawat experience in Nineveh did not receive comparable support to operations in Anbar and Diyala. First, because neither the Shammar nor the Juburi, the two main tribal confederations in the region, joined the mass movement. Only 1200 members of the Juburi tribe formed a local Sahawat movement while part of the Shammar was more inclined to support the ISI. Second, Kurdish fears to see the rise of a powerful Arab tribal militia outside a formal security apparatus also prevented its formation. By the end of 2009, which coincided with US decision to pull out its troops from the cities, ISI survived principally in Northern Iraq after being expelled from previous strongholds in Anbar, Diyala and Baghdad. This moment was considered as the low point in the organisation's short history since it did not have any territorial control for a group claiming to be a state. This evolution was confirmed in the Al Naba report on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017, in which it was described how the ISI had become exhausted and could not fight as a conventional fighting force. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi is said to have declared: "we now have no place where we can stand for a quarter of an hour"<sup>350</sup>.

### **5-The reasons behind ISI's fall in 2008-2010**

Before the research peak observed after 2014, the literature on the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), its fall by 2008 and the reasons behind its demise were the focus of much of the academic debate about the group. Most of the literature advanced to explain its demise was a dual explanation based on the combination

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<sup>350</sup> Al Naba issue 101 p8



of the US surge, which raised the pressure on the group coupled with the tribal backlash the group was the victim with the rise of the Awakening Councils or Sahawat<sup>351</sup>. Making too many enemies, especially from the Sunni nationalist camp involved in the insurgency and the tribes, ISI was forced to withdraw from the cities. Most of the literature tends to explain the backlash of the tribes against ISI due to its excessive use of violence and exactions against the population by enforcing Sharia Law.

A chapter<sup>352</sup> of the study on Harmony Documents by the CTC in 2008 entitled “Bomber, Bank Accounts and Bleed out” was dedicated to Al Qaeda’s rebellion in Al Anbar in Iraq and the success of the US-led counter-insurrection campaign in 2007-2008. After the proclamation of the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006, the group forced other groups through negotiation and also coercion to join its ranks. According to the authors, grievances towards ISI’s policy caused the formation of the Anbar Salvation Council, which represented a “backlash to the tactics and techniques” used by ISI against tribes and rebel groups that refused to join its ranks. The study’s main argument is that the US military response played an essential role in weakening the group’s presence in Al Anbar. However, the most determinant factors explaining IS’ demise came from the role played by tribal elements in Anbar Province.

In a 2012 journal article entitled “Testing the surge”<sup>353</sup>, Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman and Jacob Shapiro examined the relation between the level of violence and the formation of Sahawat in 38 areas of operations in Iraq. Reduction of violence was faster in 24 areas of operations after the establishment of these militias. Concerning the efficiency of Sahawat groups against ISI, the researcher Ahmed Hashim considers that its margin of manoeuvre and capacity to move was

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<sup>351</sup> I use the term Sahawat, which corresponds to its Arabic translation

<sup>352</sup> Bergen, Peter, Joseph Felter, Vahid Brown, and Jacob Shapiro. Report. Edited by Fishman Brian, *Bombers, Bank Accounts, & Bleedout: Al-qa'ida's Road in and Out of Iraq* Combatting, Terrorism Center at West Point, 2006, p83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05588>

<sup>353</sup>Biddle, Stephen, Friedman, Jeffrey A. and Jacob Shapiro, 'Testing the Surge', *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2012, pp.7-40

put under great pressure because of the role of insurgent Sunni groups and other Iraqi civilians.<sup>354</sup> In his research, he quoted a diary of an ISI emir found by US forces in Balad, where to explain setbacks he complained about the “betrayal of brothers”, especially the Islamic Army in Iraq in the city of Balad.

As part of his thesis Sean M. McClure<sup>355</sup> analysed the many factors that contributed to AQI’s demise from 2008. According to him, Iraq’s Sunnis and AQI had a pre-existing ideological and cultural gap, which ultimately made it lose popular support. However, as explained by the book “The illusion of victory”, written by Carter Malkasian<sup>356</sup>, a former advisor on counterinsurgency, dispatched in Iraq between 2003 and 2006, explaining the rise of the Sahawat only because of IS’ excesses can be misleading. The Sahawat experience was highly dependent on financial and logistical support from the Americans, even though many have raised the idea that IS’ brutality or crimes were behind the uprisings. The author considers that IS’ violence could not constitute the main driving force for explaining the phenomenon and the backlash of the tribe. The financial incentive and the greed of tribal leaders who had access to essential amounts of cash and weapons from the US also explain the eagerness of some tribes to join the program. While tribal leaders cited IS atrocities (beheading of Sunni civilians) or odd religious zeal (such as forbidding vegetables or excommunicating people for trivial reasons) to explain their involvement, this financial incentive was also an essential factor.

The book “The Master Plan” offers another explanation of ISI’s fall in 2007-2010 by citing its failure to conclude a broad alliance with other Sunni groups even from the jihadist realm such as Ansar Al Sunna<sup>357</sup>. This particular group suffered a split in 2007 after the arrest of its leader, Al Shafai. As a result, part of the organisation

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<sup>354</sup> Ahmed S Hashim, *Caliphate at war*, Hurst and Company London, 2017, p203

<sup>355</sup> Sean McClure, “The Lost Caravan : the rise and fall of Al Qaeda in Iraq, 2003—2007”, 2010, <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/5247>, p121

<sup>356</sup> Carter Malkasian, *Illusion of victory : the Anbar Awakening and the rise of the Islamic State*, Oxford university Press, 2017

<sup>357</sup> Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan, ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, Yale University Press, 2017, p105

joined the Iraqi political process while others remained committed to militancy. Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir, ISI's Minister of War, was eager to exploit this fault line, making this group enter the ISI. According to Fishman, he even offered to the Ansar Al Sunna leader the position of the Minister of Justice and War in the case of receiving allegiance from the group. His offer was rejected by Al Shafai, the leader of the splinter group. Fishman speculates that if he had accepted, it would have reshaped the Islamic State, increased its influence on the Iraqi insurgency and may have changed its fate.

Fishman also describes internal problems inside ISI which explain its demise. Local emirs were stockpiling weapons instead of using them and building their militias instead of defending the organisation's goals<sup>358</sup>. Another factor was the group's failure to adequately use its human resources between local fighters reluctant to participate in bold operations and foreign fighters lacking military skill and alien to the Iraqi society. Due to the surveillance of the US army, local and senior leaders could not check on their work because of the risk of being tracked. The inability to communicate may have contributed to the group's strategic errors like the involvement of local commanders in fighting with other groups without the approval of senior commanders. In Baghdad, during May 2007, 700 fighters were killed in heavy fights against the "Jihad and Reform Front" a coalition of rival Islamist armed groups. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir tried to limit this conflict but failed to see how quickly Sunni insurgents were turning against them and how ISI local leaders' independence was counterproductive. For Fishman, ISI's decentralisation process sparked a wave of violence between its zealous local commanders and other armed groups that its leadership could not prevent unlike during Zarqawi's times, when he had the charisma, aura and leadership to control his troops<sup>359</sup>.

Finally, the last reason for ISI's demise in 2007 is attributed to the success of the so-called "surge" with the injection of 30 000 additional US troops mainly in

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid p106

<sup>359</sup> Ibid p110

Baghdad. The idea of a decline in violence caused only by this injection of forces should be mitigated since researchers<sup>360</sup> have stressed out the existence of other factors coinciding with the fall of violence such as the end of the sectarian conflict in Baghdad where the potential targets of violence had either been killed or fled. As a result, Shia militias won the civil war in the capital and the Sunni-Shia mixed neighbourhood disappeared. The Gulf/2000 project<sup>361</sup> map detailing the ethnic composition of Baghdad illustrates the new religious composition of the city's neighbourhoods after the 2007 sectarian cleansing wave. Indeed, when comparing the maps of 2003 and early 2007, a significant number of formerly mixed and Sunni blocks were converted to be occupied by Shias. If we examine the maps of early 2007 and 2009, only minor changes in the sectarian composition of the city were registered, which reinforces the idea that much of the violence already took place to change the sectarian structure of the town.

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<sup>360</sup> Andrew Gavin Marchall, "Empire Under Obama, Part 4: Counterinsurgency, Death Squads, and the Population as a Target", The Hampton Institute, October 31st, 2013, <https://truthout.org/articles/empire-under-obama-part-4-counterinsurgency-death-squads-and-the-population-as-the-target/>

<sup>361</sup> "Gulf/2000 project: Maps and statistics collections", 16 December 2012, <http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml>

## VI- Islamic State's Military Tactics and the Indirect Approach (Nov 2011- April 2014)

Facing multiple coordinated forces at the same time, the pressure on the group was continually gaining in efficiency in the capturing of its territories and precision by targeting its members. The period between 2007 and 2010 witnessed the steady rise of an efficient US-led beheading program targeting the group's leadership. The number of US Special Operations Forces increased to 5000 by the summer of 2007. They spearheaded a very intense "capture or kill" campaign against ISI members in the country. Coupled with an anti-terror intelligence team in "fusion cells", they were very effective in the targeting of its leaders and gathering intelligence on the group. The arrest in March 2010 of the ISI emir in Baghdad at a checkpoint in the capital by the Iraqi Army is said<sup>362</sup> to have led to the killing in Tikrit of both leaders of the group in April, Abu Hamza Al Muhajir the Minister of War and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the leader. Dozens of other middle-level commanders were captured in the following months. According to the CIA's former director, ISI was at that time "near strategic defeat"<sup>363</sup>. In 2011, the departure of US troops became effective and was concomitant with a process of restructuration of the group under the leadership of the then leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, his deputy Abu Mohamed Al Adnani and the Minister of War, Hajji Bakr. ISI pragmatically realised that it had to adapt to the new situation by reprioritising and recalibrating the compass of the conflict. It turned towards a strategy of signature attacks with media resonance and focused on targeting the Sahawat leadership. It temporarily abandoned its ultimate goal of territorial control, retreated from the cities to the desert of Anbar and Nineveh. It also profited from a surge in manpower thanks to the release between 2009 and 2010 of nine thousand detainees from military prisons. Among them was possibly Abu Mohamad Al Adnani, released in 2010. A few years later, the group would

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<sup>362</sup>"Captured militant offers insight into Al Qaeda leader", Dallas News, 1/5/2010, <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/news/2010/05/01/Captured-militant-offers-insight-into-al-1726>

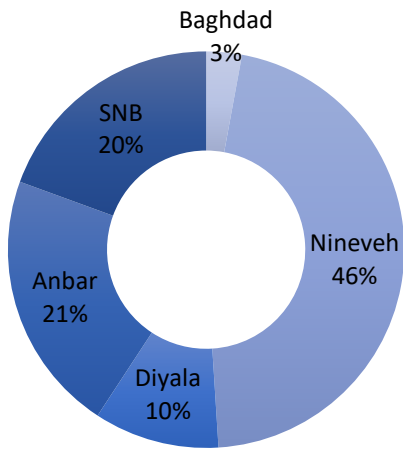
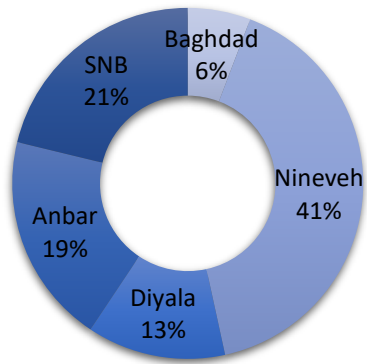
<sup>363</sup> Joby Warrick, *The rise of The Black Flags*, Bantam Press, 2015, p68

continue to replenish its constituency, preparing a new phase by fomenting large-scale prison breaks of its leadership and operatives.

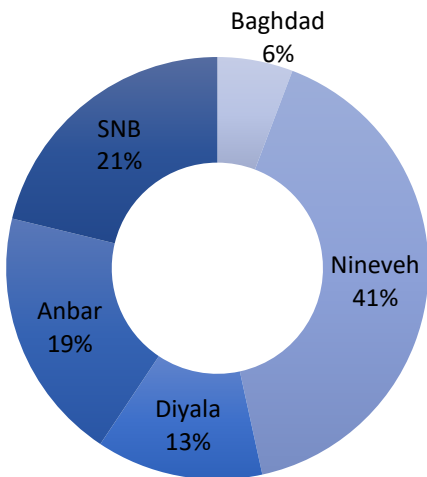
### 1- Quantitative analysis of IS operations, general overview

	Confrontational	Average /month	Non-confrontational	Average /month	total	Average operations /month
Baghdad	79	3	882	29	961	32
Nineveh	1255	42	5518	184	6773	226
Diyala	278	9	1841	61	2119	71
Anbar	581	19	2646	88	3227	108
Salahudeen and Northern Baghdad	529	18	2994	100	3523	117
Total	2722	91	13881	462	16603	553

*Table 2 Confrontational and non-confrontational operations claimed per province between November 2011 and April 2014*



**Figure** Distribution of military operations claimed per province (Nov 11- Apr 14)



**Figure 1** Repartition of the total number of confrontational operations per province

**Figure 2** Repartition of the total number of non-confrontational operations per province

### **Comparison of the volume of operations claimed.**

From a general perspective, most of the military operations claimed by IS in Iraq between 2012 and mid-2014 took the shape of non-confrontational operations in 83 % of the cases (Table 2) which confirms our expectation. The ratio of non-confrontational operations per confrontational operations is approximately 5:1 with 462 non-confrontational operations against 91 confrontational ones per month. Consequently, Figure 3 and Figure 1 are similar regarding the same percentage of total and non-confrontational operations claimed by the group while for Figure 2, which corresponds to confrontational operations, the repartition slightly changes with a gain of 5% for Nineveh and 2% for Anbar at the expense of Baghdad (-3%) and Diyala (-6%). This figure confirms the fact that even after the US withdrawal in 2011, the group remained conscious of the superiority of the Iraqi Army and its allies and did not confront them. The province of Nineveh was the location of 41% of the total attacks, while SNB and Anbar had 20% each, Diyala 13% and Baghdad 6% (Figure 2). The effort of two years of military campaigns combining guerrilla warfare and urban terrorism affected the outcome. In the provinces where IS had been the most active such as Nineveh, Anbar and SNB, the group was able to seize territory in 2014. The only province where it achieved a complete victory by entirely controlling it was Nineveh, which counted for almost half of the group's effort during the study's timeframe. From Figure 2 and 3, we can categorise three types of provinces:

- Baghdad and Diyala are under-resourced provinces if we compare them to the rest of the panel. From November 2011 to April 2014, Baghdad had an average of 32 total operations per month claimed and Diyala 71, which was far from the average number of operations claimed by the other provinces such as Nineveh with 200 per month and Anbar and SNB with 100 per month. The overall number of confrontational operations claimed remained low for two years, 79 for Baghdad and 278 for Diyala. Both provinces also had a low average number of confrontational operations with three per month for Baghdad and nine per month for Diyala. However, concerning non-confrontational operations, the average number of



operations claimed was double in Diyala compared to Baghdad. The province's environment and topography are less hostile than Baghdad and more prone to guerrilla-type warfare.

- SNB and Anbar provinces share some similarities; their number of operations claimed is similar (around 500 confrontational operations and 3200 non-confrontational operations in total). Their average number of operations claimed by month was close to 100, with approximately 19 confrontational operations and 100 non-confrontational ones. Both provinces represent 20 % of IS' total number of operations in the five provinces.
- Nineveh was, not surprisingly, the IS' province with the most activity. It witnessed 41% of the attacks claimed, 46% of confrontational attacks and 41% of non-confrontational attacks. According to IS' claims, the province had the best potential to be its "flagship project" for its future military campaigns in the country.

## Variation of IS operations variation in Iraq

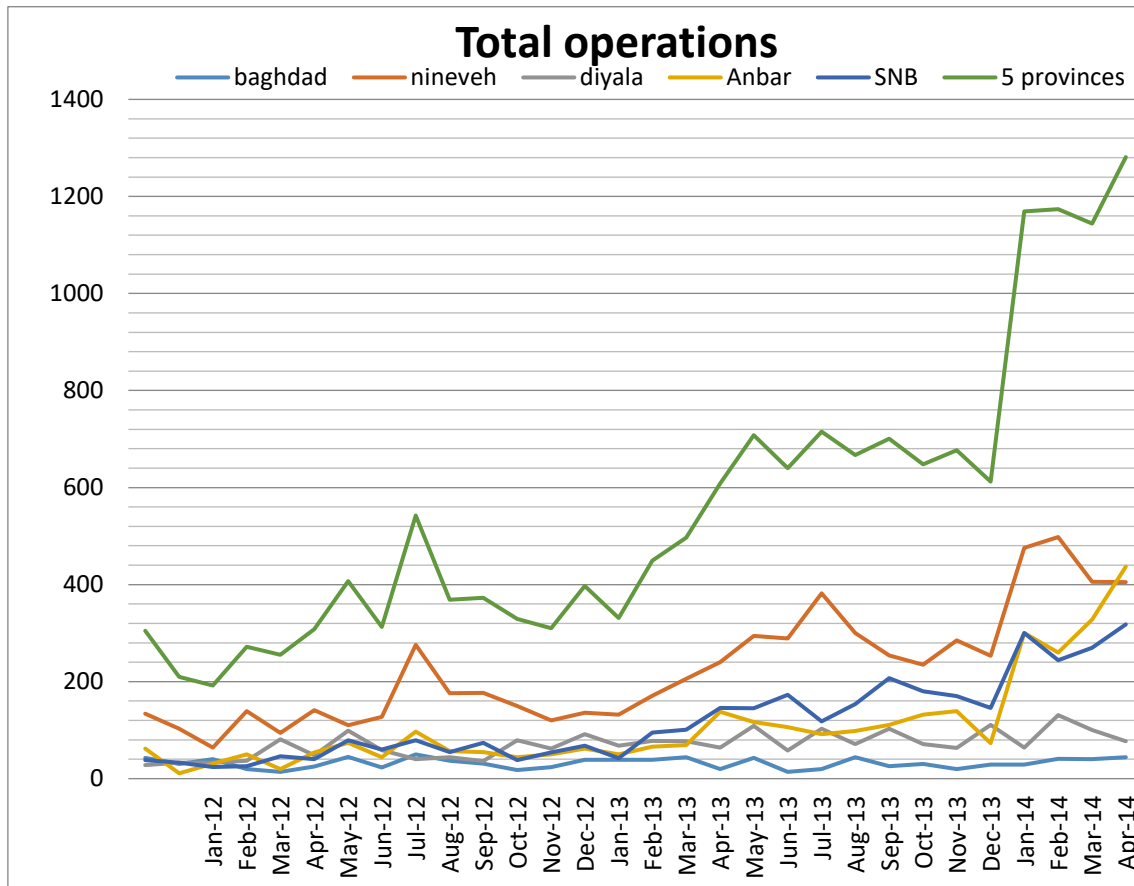


Figure 3 Evolution of the number of total operations claimed by the Islamic state in Iraq (Nov 11-April 2014)

From a chronological perspective, we can say that the volume of claimed operations made by the group in November 2011 gives us an idea about its level of activity at the time of the US withdrawal from Iraq. Except for Nineveh province with 150 operations per month, the number of operations claimed by the group in the rest of the provinces was meagre and did not exceed 50 operations per month. The curve for total operations mirrors the one of Nineveh, which shows the critical weight this province had for IS' military effort. This confirms the idea exposed in the literature review, that Nineveh constituted IS' last sanctuary in Iraq in 2010-2011.

The total number of operations decreased in November and December 2011 but increased from January 2012 right after the last US soldier in mission retreated from the country. The second possibility to explain this low starting point was the group's effort to establish itself and have its word in the Syrian Civil War. In the

summer of 2011, Al Jolani and high-ranking officers of the Islamic State in Iraq were dispatched to Syria to establish Jabhat Al Nusra with allegedly 50% of ISI's resources. Abu Muhanad Al Suweidawi, as well as Hajji Bakr, one of the most capable and important military leaders, were said to have travelled to Syria back in 2010 which may have impacted the group's level of activity in Iraq in 2011.

The five provinces started from the same point in January of 2012, with 60 operations per month for Nineveh and around 20 for the other provinces. The gap between Baghdad and Nineveh was not important until July 2012. From January to June 2012, the number of operations increased drastically in Nineveh from 64 to 276. July 2012 corresponded to the start of a nationwide campaign of the group-oriented towards attacks on prisons located in Salahudeen and Baghdad. During that period, Diyala was the second most active province in November 2012. All the five provinces claimed less than 400 operations per month, which is quite low compared to the figure of 2013. Because of the improvement of security, the Iraqi Government announced that Iraq's armed forces would relinquish their role in internal security and shift to protecting the borders of the country by July 2012. In the same month, we can find a peak of operations claimed in Anbar, SNB and Nineveh, which coincided with the holy month of Ramadan and the beginning of the "breaking the walls" campaign on 21<sup>st</sup> of July, 2012.

Contrary to expectations, such announcement resulted in the fall of the number of claimed total operations from 542 per month to 300. This decrease was partly due to the fall of activity in Nineveh, where the number of operations was divided by two in January 2013 while in other provinces it remained stable. The number of operations reached a new peak in July/Ramadan of 2013 with the end of the "breaking the walls" campaign. From August 2013, a new campaign was launched, called the "soldier's harvest". The number of operations declined in Nineveh and increased in the other provinces of Anbar and SNB. In Baghdad and Diyala, this announcement did not seem to have a visible effect on the volume of operations. Baghdad's curve of operations remained stable while the curve for Diyala followed a sinusoid tempo. The point of inflexion appeared in January of 2014, when the number of operations climbed sharply in Nineveh, SNB and Anbar, with similar variations. The conquest of Fallujah and part of Ramadi had

the result that in April 2014, the volume of operations claimed per month in Anbar for the first time outperformed that in Nineveh (437 against 405).

**A general overview of non-confrontational and confrontational operations' variation.**

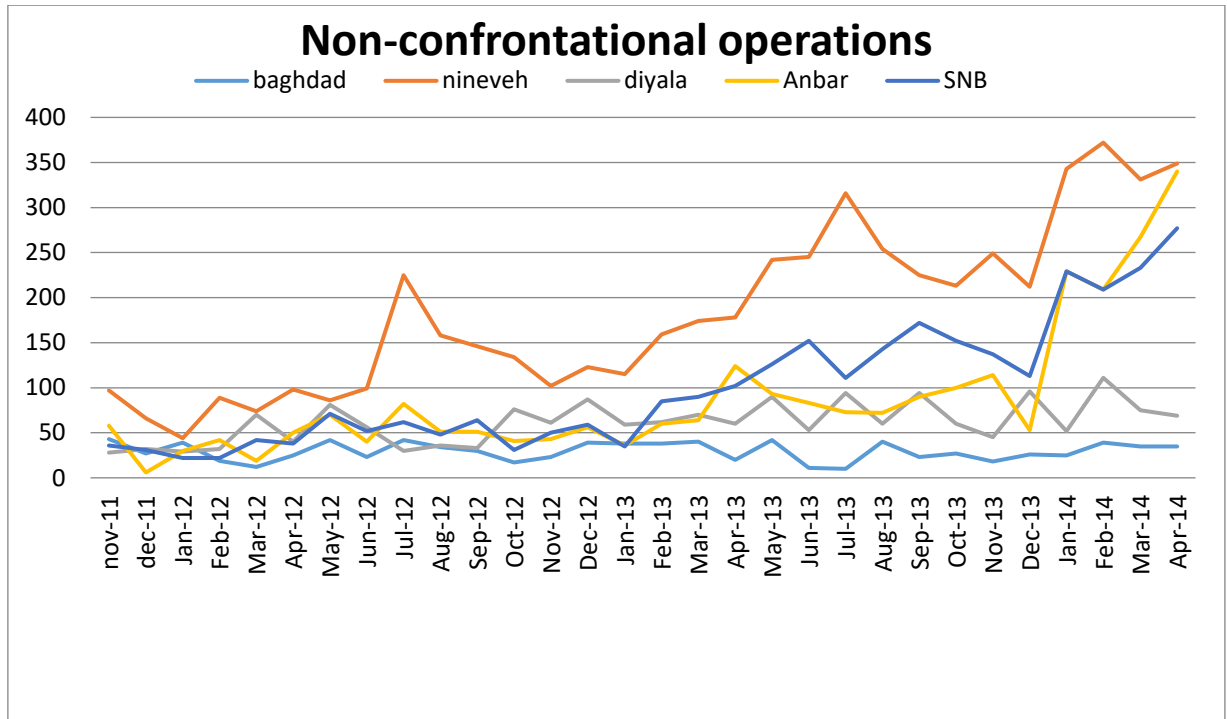


Figure 4 Evolution of the non-confrontational operations claimed per month by the Islamic State (November 11-April 2014)

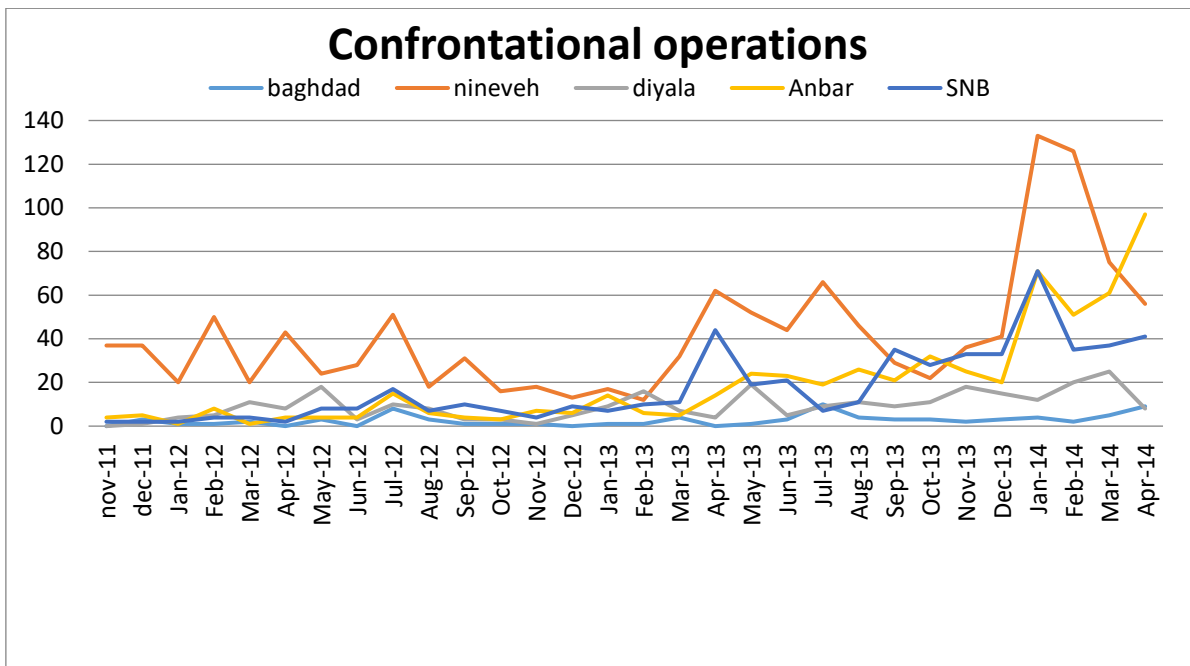


Figure 6: Evolution of confrontational operations per month claimed by the Islamic State ( November 11-April 2014)

Because non-confrontational operations represent an average of 80% of the operations claimed, their variation (Figure 5) is very similar to the one representing the evolution of the total of operations claimed. In contrast, Figure 6 is different from the last one; it shows the evolution of confrontational operations in the five provinces. Nineveh’s curve for confrontational operations is sinusoidal and is similar to the others until 2014. Until 2014, no province could sustain consecutive months of growth in the number of confrontational operations. The only provinces which could maintain the number of confrontational operations for three consecutive months were Anbar from January to March 2014 and Nineveh from February 2013 to April 2013. This proves that these types of operations are harder to mount and need more human and material resources than non-confrontational operations. Non-confrontational operations’ curves are linear and stable in their evolution while for confrontational operations they are more “chaotic” and unstable.

Between August 2012 and January 2013, there was a decrease in confrontational operations in Nineveh to a minimum of ten confrontational operations per month. Diyala’s figures were higher at the same time while the other provinces did not

exceed ten operations per month. March 2013 marked the start of a spike of confrontational attacks with the announcement of the merger between ISI and Jabhat al Nusra to form ISIS. This period from April to August 2013 also witnessed a general worsening of the security situation in the country because of the widespread protests against the Maliki government and the repression of the manifestations. The rapid increase of confrontational operations started in SNB, Nineveh and Anbar in February / March 2013 while it started a month later in Diyala.

July/August 2013 corresponded to the month of Ramadan when the “Breaking the Walls” campaign was declared finished, replaced by a new one called the “Soldier’s Harvest”. Baghdad’s figures were meagre and sometimes equalled zero except for July 13 with the important attack on Abu Ghraib prison. After that announcement, confrontational operations in Nineveh decreased abruptly while operations in SNB and Anbar increased. During December 2013, the number of confrontational operations rose steeply in Nineveh, Anbar and SNB, where the number was multiplied by 3. In January of 2014, the number of confrontational operations skyrocketed from 40 to 133 between December 2013 and January 2014. Before controlling territories in Nineveh in June of 2014, IS had the capabilities or at least the confidence to claim more confrontational operations (133 against 71 in Anbar, which represents almost double) against the ISF than in Anbar where it succeeded in controlling Fallujah and part of Ramadi six months before. This significant surge in confrontational operations was for both provinces a kind of precursor for the takeover of large areas in both governorates.

For every province, the curve of confrontational operations was sinusoidal, which means that when it reached a peak in operations during a given month, the following month witnessed a decrease in activity. This pattern was not observed for non-confrontational operations (Figure 5); provinces such as Nineveh, Anbar and SNB maintained a continued increase in the number of operations. Such an effort was not possible in Baghdad and Diyala for both types of operations. In Baghdad and Diyala, the cells involved in both types of operations needed a logistical and operational pause while for Nineveh, SNB and Anbar they only needed it for confrontational operations. It is probable that in these three

provinces, teams tasked for non-confrontational operations (assassinations teams, IED teams, sniper cells, and indirect fire teams) had enough manpower and logistical resources to sustain and escalate the volume of operations. For confrontational operations, however, they still needed between one or two months of logistical pause to recover the capacity to perform in quantity as they had done before. In neighbouring provinces such as Nineveh and SNB, one can observe months where the decrease in operations in one province corresponded to the increase in its neighbouring provinces (Aug/Sept 13, Apr/May 12). This could indicate somehow a “communicating vessels” relation between provinces where some cells were deployed to other provinces at the expense of others. Future research might be necessary in order to study the full extent of synchronisation of IS’ activities across Iraq and even Syria.

**Confrontational operations' standard deviation and variation from the mean**

	Nineveh	Anbar	SNB	Diyala	Baghdad
<p>Sample Mean <math>\bar{x}</math></p> <p><math>\bar{x} = (\sum x_i) / n</math></p>	42	19	18	9	3
<p><math>\sigma_X</math> standard deviation</p> $\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N (x_i - \mu)^2}$	28,3	22.5	17, 2	6,1	2, 9
$\bar{x} + 3\sigma$	126	86.5	69	27	11.7
$\bar{x} + 2\sigma$	99	64	52	21	9
<p>Months of an important increase</p> <p>Where <math>n \geq \text{mean} + 2 \sigma_X</math></p>	No	January 2014	No	March 2014	July 2013
<p>Months of an exceptional increase</p> <p>Where <math>n \geq \text{mean} + 3 \sigma_X</math></p>	January 2014 February 2014	April 2014	January 2014	No	No

Table 3 Standard deviation, mean and data dispersion for confrontational operations



	Nineveh	Anbar	SNB	Diyala	Baghdad
Sample Mean $\bar{x} = (\sum x_i) / n$	184	88	100	61	29
$\sigma_X$ standard deviation $\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N (x_i - \mu)^2}$	99	74	87	22	10
Mean+ 3* standard deviation	482	310	361	127	59
Mean + 2* standard deviation	382	236	274	105	49
Month increased Where $n \geq \text{mean} + 2 \sigma_X$	No	March 2014	April 2014	February 2014	No
Exceptional months Where $n \geq \text{mean} + 3 \sigma_X$	No	April 2014	No	no	no

Table 4 Standard deviation, mean and data dispersion for non-confrontational operations

One of the objectives of this statistical study on the evolution of IS' operational claims in Iraq is to explain the variation in quantity and quality of its operations. In order to grasp the moments when the group shifted its strategy, it is necessary first to define normality and abnormality in the pace of its operations. In statistics, there is a tool used in order to observe it, known as the standard deviation. Standard deviation shows the distance from the mean and reflects how widely a data is distributed about the mean. It is also useful in order to identify outliers, which are data observed that lies an abnormal distance from other values in the sample. A typical result would be situated within one or two standard deviations from the mean, while other results from three standard deviations from the mean would be extraordinary and considered as relevant for a closer look from the observer. For the case study, in the case of confrontational operations, extraordinary data on confrontational operations could be interpreted as a shift in the strategy and modus operandi adopted from guerrilla and concealment towards conventional warfare and open confrontation. Except for Anbar in April 2014, there were no extraordinary results for non-confrontational operations, meaning superior to three standard deviations from the mean (Table 3). While for confrontational operations (Table 4) it is possible to identify provinces where the number of operations was far away from the average number of confrontational operations claimed by month while superior to the distance of three standard deviations from the mean. These provinces were the ones in which urban assaults later succeeded, and territorial control was achieved: Nineveh, SNB and Anbar. For Baghdad and Diyala, the standard deviation is low, which means that almost all the data is around the mean, showing more regularity of the activity. For Nineveh, SNB and Anbar, however, the standard deviation is high because of the mean being affected by outliers. There is also a significant increase in Baghdad and Diyala in March 2014 and July 2013 with a distance of two standard deviations from the mean. These individual cases are worth an extended explanation. The dispersion around the mean is less critical for non-confrontational operations in all the provinces, showing the regularity of IS military activity; non-confrontational operations are operations that are more regularly carried out in a routinized pace. In the next sections, I try to interpret the results that are out of the ordinary and explain them by adopting a provincial scope of analysis.

# Northern Iraq



Map of Northern Iraq. Source: Institute Study of War

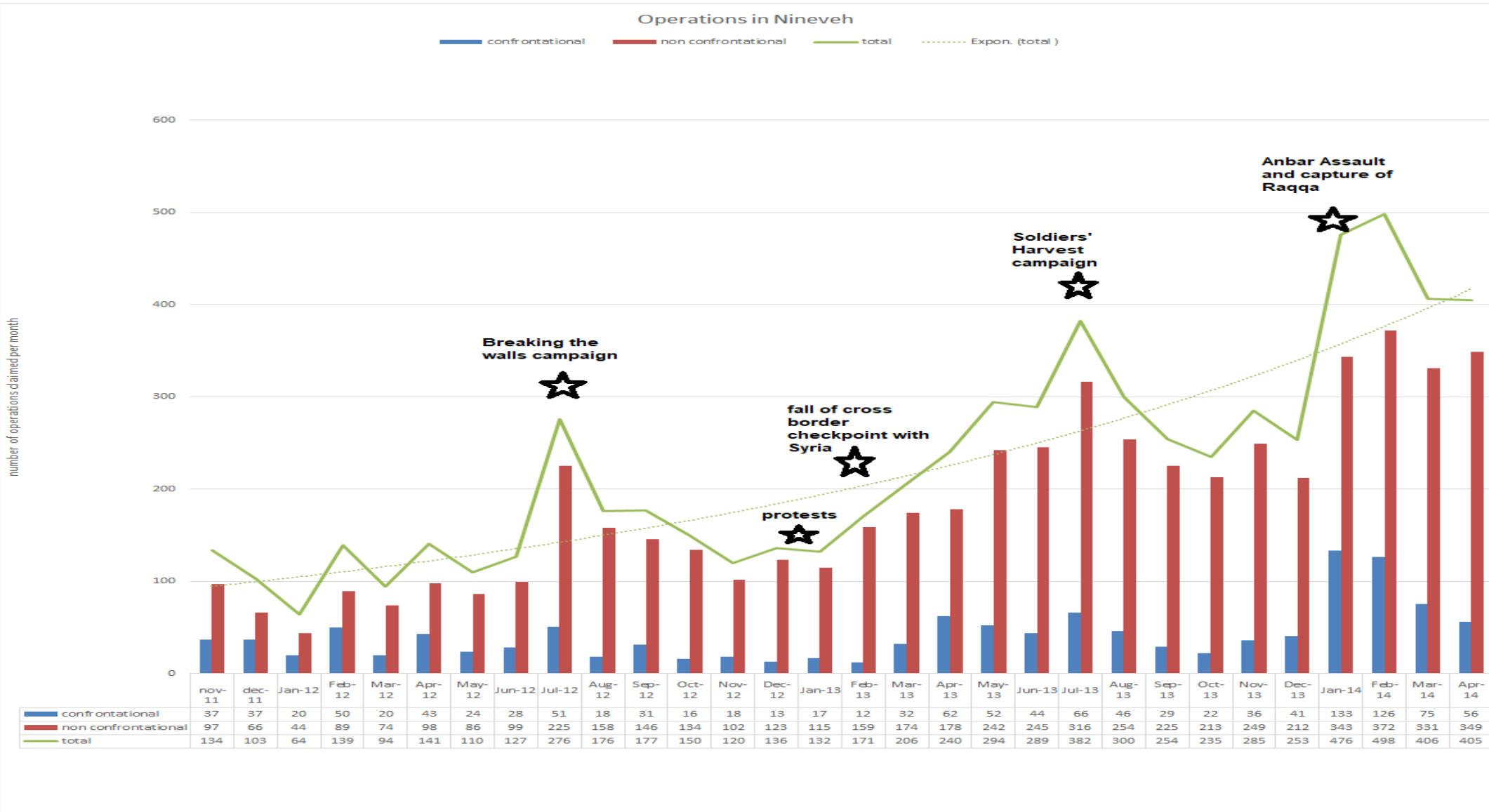


Figure 7 Evolution of operations claimed by IS in Nineveh per month from November 2011 to April 2014.

## 2-Nineveh province (figure 7)

Since 2010 in Nineveh, IS was considered to enjoy enough active and passive support from the population in order to conduct its operations. After IS' progression in Syria, it proved to be once again a paramount arena for cross-border operations. It also contains a desert zone of communication and its capital Mosul is important for the control of strategic resources in Iraq. In terms of volume of operations, Nineveh was the focus of 40% of the total operations of the Islamic State in Iraq in 2012 and 2013. We can divide the evolution of IS' operations in the province following six phases between November 2011 and May 2014, when the number of operations fluctuated in function of external factors and the group's calendar. In contrast to other provinces, Nineveh's performances seem to follow semester cycles. Its curve takes the shape of a progressive and continuous increase of six months followed by a decrease during the following semester.

### **The year 2012**

The low number of operations claimed (80) on December 11, and January 12 coincided with the full withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Right after, we can observe a phase of fluctuation in the volume of claimed monthly operations with an oscillation between 100 and 150 claimed operations per month. During the first semester of 2012, the total number of operations increased until the month of Ramadan 2012, with an increase from 80 total operations to a peak of 275, which corresponded to July and August. During these months, we can notice an abrupt increase in operations claimed especially for non-confrontational ones. Confrontational operations remained low and their volume was inflated by the excessive number of reported hand grenade attacks.

From December 2012, the number of operations continued to increase during the six following months coinciding with two important events: the start of a protest movement inspired by the Arab Spring in the Sunni provinces of Iraq and the control by opposition fighters as well as JN brigades of the border checkpoint of Yarubiah with Syria. The protest movement began in Mosul on 30<sup>th</sup> December 12, regrouping 300 people in the "*Ahrar*" place, and called principally to release prisoners and put an end to the terrorism law. It opened a period of tension and

violence between government forces and local actors. The fact that many Iraq Army soldiers stationed in Mosul originated from other provinces in Iraq represented a source of friction. The main reasons advanced were their harassment of the population and their ostensible use of sectarian slogans or flags. According to local press, who conducted a poll<sup>364</sup> on a sample of a thousand residents of Mosul, 55% called for a retreat of the Army outside the city and 72% considered that it hurt trade activities.

Types of attacks and their volume indicate how confident and well implanted the group was in Nineveh. During the two years of the study (2012 and 2013), IS reported only 27 VBIEDs in Nineveh. Compared to the 251 operations claimed just in Baghdad, the figures in Nineveh are low. This element emphasises first the group's lack of focus on Mosul during the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. Few VBIEDs and SVBIEDs were detonated, and large-scale operations did not target the prisons of the governorate (like Badush or small prisons in Mosul) unlike in Baghdad and Salahudeen. The limited use of VBIEDs and SVBIEDs indicates how concerned the group was about civilian losses in its operations. IS did not want to antagonise the urban population through which it moved and retained passive support. For that reason, the start of the nationwide "Breaking the Walls" campaign from July to December of 2012 coincided with a decrease of the total operations in Nineveh by 50% in total and 75% of its confrontational operations. It is probable that the group's main focus was to deploy its cells responsible for its most devastating operations (SVBIEDs and VBIEDs) to other provinces in order to launch waves of attacks using principally VBIEDs in Baghdad, Kirkuk and the South and target prisons located in Salahudeen such as the Tasfirat Prison in Tikrit.

### **January 2013-July 2013**

With the worsening of the situation in Syria, the border-zone with Syria offered more freedom of movement for the group in the desert area that lies

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<sup>364</sup>"Nujaifi accuses the security of negligence and the people call for a departure of the army" , Al Mada Press, 24/11/2012, <https://goo.gl/foY8Go>

between the two countries. In order to tackle this issue, ISF decided to close the checkpoints in January 2013.<sup>365</sup> Despite this decision, many events on the other side of the border indicated the evolution of the frontier towards more porosity. First, the Tel Hamis insurgent group pledged allegiance to ISIS in February 2013<sup>366</sup>, and the Al Yarubiah offensive saw the fall of the border checkpoint into the hands of JN. In Akashat, 15 IEDs planted by ISIS' cells from Anbar and Nineveh ambushed a convoy of the Syrian army withdrawing from Yarubiah and under the protection of the Iraqi army, resulting in the killing of approximately 100 soldiers<sup>367</sup>.

Between January and July 2013, the number of non-confrontational operations almost tripled in Nineveh. Most of them were IED attacks and assassinations. The targets of assassinations were soldiers but also candidates in the provincial elections. Due to security concerns, these elections were postponed for two months in Anbar and Nineveh provinces. Assassinations were carried out against six provincial council candidates in the province<sup>368</sup>. During that period, sabotage and attacks on pipelines were also reported<sup>369</sup>. At the same time, the first news reports emerged regarding the group's use of weaponised civilian drones<sup>370</sup>, which were used massively in 2016 and 2017.

Regarding confrontational operations, an essential increase started from April 2013 when their number reached the maximum of 62 operations claimed per month. It coincided with the Hawijah clashes, which sparked a wave of violence

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<sup>365</sup> "The closing of Yarubiyah cross border checkpoint will start at 6:00 AM", Al Mada Press, 13/01/2013, <https://goo.gl/zRA8b6>

<sup>366</sup> Charles Lister, *the Syrian Jihad*, Hurst and Company London, 2015, p113

<sup>367</sup> "AQI claims the raid of Aquidat and confirms the killing of 100 Syrian soldiers", 11/03/2013, Al Mada Press , URL: <https://goo.gl/tjnbzx>

<sup>368</sup> "Another Iraq candidate killed ahead of provincial elections", Daily Star Lebanon, 14 June 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Jun-14/220395-gunmen-kill-election-candidate-in-iraq.ashx#axzz2X550kr6J>

<sup>369</sup> "Al Nujaifi : the explosion at two oil drums was the result of leds and the securities services invented the guided missile theory", Al Mada Press, 9/04/2013, <https://goo.gl/U5HdNo>

<sup>370</sup> "Security forces seize components for drones and found 4 in South Mosul", Al Mada Press, 19/08/2013, <https://goo.gl/ynACim>

across the country. During that period, the ISF confronted a myriad of Sunni tribal groups, former insurgents and militias in Kirkuk, Anbar, Salahudeen and Nineveh.

### **August – December 2013**

Interestingly, like the year before with the “Breaking the Walls” campaign, the announcement of a new nationwide campaign entitled the “Soldier’s Harvest” was followed a by a continuous decrease in the number of operations in Nineveh. We can presume that this phase was an internal restructuration period for the group in the province. On September 11, 2013, ISIS announced that the area of activity of the Nineveh province was to cover Jazeera desert, Ba’aj district along the Syria border, and central and southern Nineveh<sup>371</sup>. This announcement consequently, stretched the area of activity of the province to cover the Nineveh governorate south and west of Mosul to the Syrian border. This may also explain the increase in the number of operations claimed by the group in the whole area, because of the inclusion of new areas. According to a news report<sup>372</sup>, in October of 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ordered three brigades to move from Syria to Iraq, which reportedly caused the Iraqi authorities to launch aggressive border security operations. On October 4, 2013, the Jazeera and Badiya operations command announced the destruction of 42 vehicles at a hidden rest point in the Jazeera.<sup>373</sup>

ISIS undertook an extensive campaign of targeting government representatives during the fall of 2013. This appeared to be effective in undermining the ISF and intimidating the local population. On September 24, 2013, ISIS called sheikhs of

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<sup>371</sup> “Closing of the Mosul airport and tightening of the controls with the Syrian border in the wake of wide security operation”, Al Mada Press, 10/09/2103 <https://goo.gl/QdTrv9>

<sup>372</sup> “Interior ministry denies entrance of 1,000 Gunmen from Syria – but expert considers it ‘possible’ because of poor Intelligence Efforts”, Al Mada Press, August 21, 2013 <https://goo.gl/m8GyFW>

<sup>373</sup> “Operations in the desert destroyed 42 trucks used for smuggling to and from Syria: al-Qaeda has lost 70% of their western Nineveh”, Al Mada Press , 4/10/2013, <https://goo.gl/3x36DF>



the desert tribes of Nineveh to withdraw their sons from the security forces.<sup>374</sup>The warning specified a grace period of 30 days, during which the tribes and their sons would be spared. During the same period, leaflets signed by the organisation were found on the streets, threatening the Sunni population for having any governmental activity<sup>375</sup>. Their threats were put into practice later with a campaign of targeted assassinations of government officials. One of the main targets of IS' security cells was high-ranking military officials or their relatives using small weapons or IEDs. Athil Nujaifi, the president of the provincial council and the head of the Police Khalid Hamdani, were targeted without success many times<sup>376</sup>. This exhibits how well it was positioned in Mosul in order to target the social and political landscape so precisely and recruit informants from the different levels of society. Even very low-level informants of the ISF at the neighbourhood level were targeted as detailed by this local news source reporting the killing of an intelligence officer disguised as a merchant in the souk of Bab Saray in Mosul.<sup>377</sup> A Sahawat leader interview broadcasted in the Saleel Sawareem series produced by the group said that a police officer or a military operating in Mosul couldn't "live in the city because of the constant fear of being targeted"<sup>378</sup>.

The other operation used to intimidate the security forces were HBIEDs, which refers to the bombing or torching of houses. This constituted an essential part of the non-confrontational operations used by the group in order to intimidate the

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<sup>374</sup> "Al-Qaeda gives Ninewa tribes 30 days to direct their families to abandon the ranks of the Iraqi army and police", al Shafaaq News, September 25, 2013, <http://www.shafaaq.com/sh2/index.php/news/iraq-news/64817--30-.html>.

<sup>375</sup> "Finding of Al Qaeda's leaflets warning functionaries to not continue their work in Southern Mosul", Al Mada Press, 17/09/2013, <https://goo.gl/nm8HfB>

<sup>376</sup> "The chief of the Mosul police survives an assassination attempt in which three of its guards were killed", Al Mada Press, 19/09/2013, <https://goo.gl/Dnu5sG>

<sup>377</sup> "Killing of a person linked with the intelligence of the ministry", Al Shafaaq News, September 25, 2013, <http://www.shafaaq.com/sh2/index.php/news/iraq-news/64817--30-.html> .

<sup>377</sup> "Killing of a person linked with the ministry of interior infiltrated as a merchant in Central Mosul", Al Mada Press, 31/12/2012, <https://goo.gl/UdMSLw>

<sup>378</sup> Al Furqan video Saleel Sawareem 1 (footage at min 57)

population and weaken the ISF, by directly threatening its members.<sup>379</sup> During the “Soldier’s Harvest” campaign,<sup>380</sup> announced on July 29, 2013, HBIEDs reflected the prevailing narrative of the campaign by targeting soldiers in their homes. IS’ security cells used HBIEDs in Shirqat, Qayara, and Shura cities south of Mosul, as an indicator of their established control in the region. These operations were not necessarily designed to kill the ISF officers or their families, but to break their morale by destroying their homes.

### **January – April 2014**

Retrospectively, the peak of indirect and confrontational operations which occurred in December /January of 2014 could have raised all the concerns about ISIS’ growing activities in the province. This can be explained first by a necessity to divert ISF’s attention from the heavy fights in Anbar or to test their response in Mosul as a precursor for the June attack. However, it constituted also a signal of the group’s enhanced capacity to confront the ISF and orchestrate urban assaults in the province. In January 2014, conflicting reports<sup>381</sup> pointed out that part of the city of Shura situated 45km south of Mosul was under the control of ISIS fighters. Twenty armed men attacked the city while individuals entered mosques and called for jihad in megaphones. This attack corresponded to the first attempt to launch an urban assault in the governorate. This could have been a way of testing ISF’s defences in the governorate. In the province, the security situation was worsening; consequently, a general curfew<sup>382</sup> was imposed in February in Mosul while the Badush prison was attacked by 20 fighters supposedly linked to

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<sup>379</sup> “Al Qaeda fighters explode 6 houses belonging to security forces after emptying them from their inhabitants”, Al Mada Press, 2013/09/17, <https://goo.gl/iS74E7>

<sup>380</sup> “al-Furqan Media presents a news bulletin from Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham: “Harvest of Operations for the year 1433 H in Iraq,” Jihadology, August 14, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/14/al-furqan-media-presents-a-news-bulletin-from-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-harvest-of-operations-for-the-year-1433-h-in-iraq/> .

<sup>381</sup> “Nineveh governor deny the reports indicating the fall of Shura and confirms that a division should be present and not 10 soldiers”, Al Mada Press, 5/01/2014 , <https://goo.gl/ENy85N>

<sup>382</sup>“The Security commission orders a night Curfew in Mosul for one week”, Al Mada Press, 4/02/2014, <https://goo.gl/Ff7qVW>

Baathists and not ISIS<sup>383</sup>. However, in Mosul, four *inghimassi* fighters stormed a police station in the south of Mosul, and an SVBIED exploded against a checkpoint<sup>384</sup>.

On the other hand, the other explanation for the rise of confrontational operations in Mosul was the increase of ISF's operations against the group. At the beginning of 2014, the Iraqi Army declared the killing of ISIS' governor of Mosul<sup>385</sup> and launched several operations against the group. First, there was the operation "revenge for the leader Mohammed", when it claimed to have destroyed a training camp of the group <sup>386</sup> southeast of Mosul. Other operations were launched in the successive months, such as "Furious Lion"<sup>387</sup>, which lasted 10 days and resulted in the arrest of 100 suspects; or operation "Braves of Iraq"<sup>388</sup> in the south of the province which resulted in clashes with IS members, the killing of 38 suspects and the destruction of an IED factory and a training camp.

The number of confrontational operations was so significant that from the figures, the battle for territorial control was initiated in January and February of 2014 with 133 and 126 operations claimed per month. To give an idea about the magnitude of such an effort in Nineveh, during the four first months of 2014, the group claimed 389 confrontational operations, which almost equalled the volume of its operations in 2013 (450) and 2012 (408). From these figures, we can assume

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<sup>383</sup> "Security Forces thwarts an attack on Badush prison in North West Mosul and the disbanded Baath claims its responsibility", Al Mada Press, 5/02/2014, <https://goo.gl/dNknKS>

<sup>384</sup> "Four suicide bombers attacks the police HQ in Southern Mosul and fighters take control of it and take hostages", Al Mada Press, 28/12/2013, <https://goo.gl/6YVZqD>

<sup>385</sup> "Killing of IS' Mosul governor and two of its aides in heavy fights southern Mosul", Al Mada Press, 10/01/2014, <https://goo.gl/vrg8jp>

<sup>386</sup> "Destruction of training camp and arrest of 7 suspects is part of the larger campaign ( the revenge for the leader Mohamed) in South East Mosul", Al Mada Press, 29/12/2013, <https://goo.gl/pqyLG5>

<sup>387</sup> "Operation Furious Lion ends with the arrest of 100 suspects and the killing of 4 terrorists", Al Mada Press, 12/02/2014, <https://goo.gl/n92erM>

<sup>388</sup> "Security forces start operation " the braves of Iraq" to pursue Daech South of Mosul", Al Mada Press, 20/02/2014, <https://goo.gl/tDQgjD>

that the battle for Nineveh and the confrontational phase against the ISF started in IS' minds in January, six months before the "June 2014" surprise attack.

From the end of 2011 to the spring of 2014, the variation of the operations claimed followed an exponential trend line reflecting the dramatic and constant surge of operations of the group in the province where it was multiplied by 5. Overall, confrontational operations witnessed a dramatic increase, which culminated with extraordinary data in January and February 2014, months before the urban assault of Mosul. It resulted in extraordinary results where the number of confrontational operations was three standard deviations from the mean in January and February of 2014. The success of the June offensive confirmed the exponential trend line of IS' confrontational operations, which were multiplied by four during the timeframe of the research. Finally, the announcement of new operations in July 2012 and 2013 coincided with the month of Ramadan where a peak of activity is observable for the two periods.



Map of Diyala Governorate Source ISW



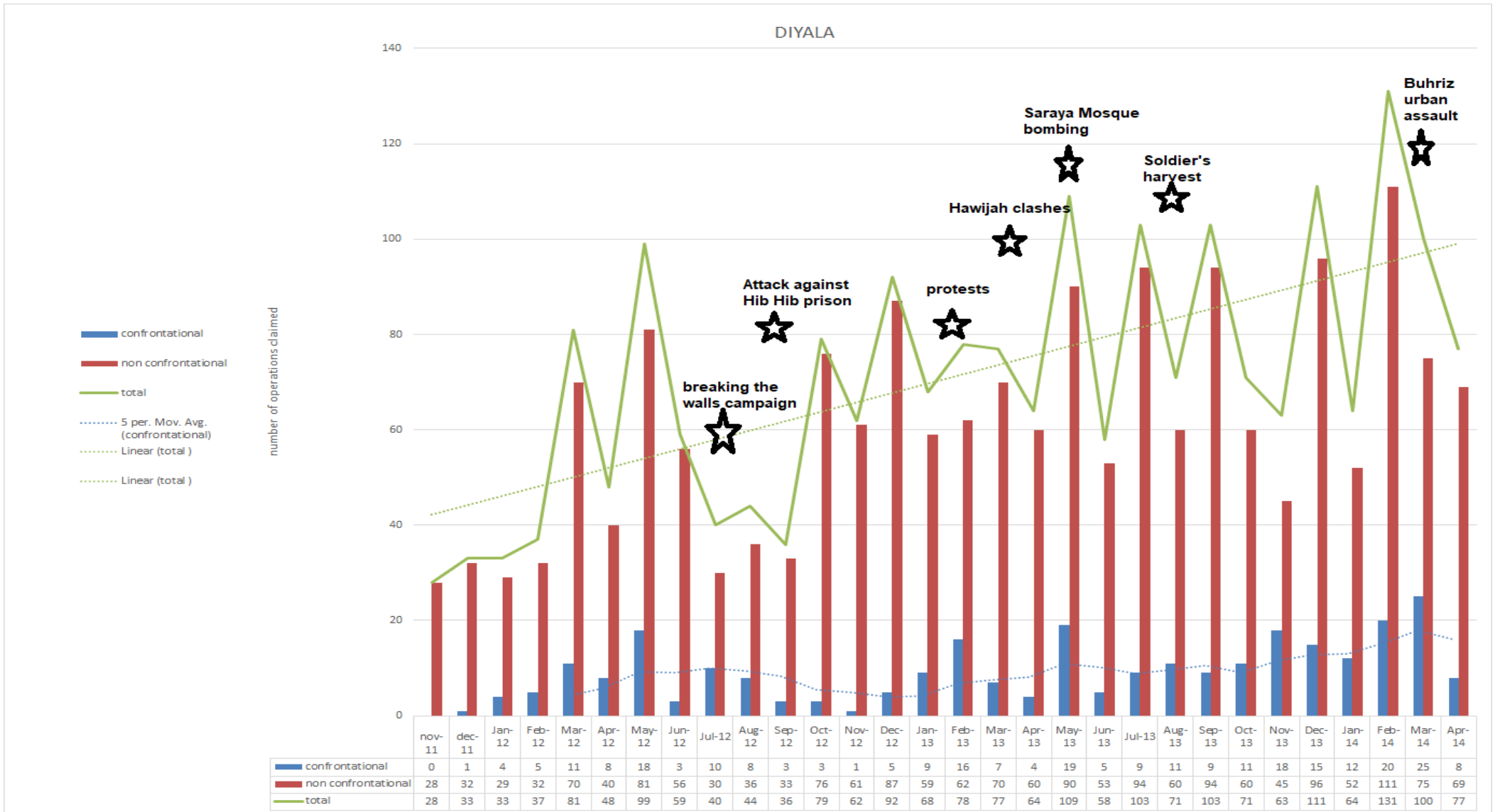


Figure 8 Evolution of operations claimed by IS in Diyala per month from November 2011 to April 2014.

### 3-Diyala (figure 8)

After its withdrawal from Anbar in 2006, Diyala Province has been considered as a critical province for the Islamic State in Iraq. First, it constituted a place of retreat such as in 2005-2007 for its providing of an effective cover-up. Secondly, it still represents a pivotal base for projection towards attack zones of the group, in southern Salahudine, Baghdad and its northern belt. As suggested by Jessica Lewis<sup>389</sup>, in 2013, the Diyala Valley had been a “command and control node” within the group’s support zones. The security council of Diyala Province admitted in December 2012 that signs were appearing of the re-emergence of the group in its traditional support zones.<sup>390</sup> IS’ numbers reflected this trend; the total number of operations claimed was multiplied by three and confrontational operations by five from the beginning of 2012 to April 2014. Up to 87% of the operations against the ISF, the Sahawat and Shia militias were non-confrontational, which shows that the group did not have the possibility nor the will to confront its enemies. Most of the claimed attacks were IEDs, HBIEDS and assassinations.

After the departure of US troops in January 2012, there was an essential increase in operations from 33 in February to 81 in March and a decrease again to 40 in April. This trimester cycle shaped most of the variation of IS’ claimed operations in Diyala. There were exceptions to this trend, for example, in July, August and September 2012, when the number of operations remained stable at around 40 operations. This anomaly could be explained by the relocation of the group’s efforts to Baghdad Province, where the “Breaking the Walls” campaign started. The other trimester cycle that was abnormal was the January/ February / March 2013 cycle. The decrease in operations in that period could have been the effect of a large scale operation conducted by ISF on 19<sup>th</sup> January of 2013 that seized

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<sup>389</sup>Jessica Lewis, “The Islamic State returns to Diyala”, Middle East Security reports 18, April 2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Lewis-Diyala.pdf>

<sup>390</sup> “Diyala’s security commission: “there are indications of Al Qaeda’s return to its previous safe havens and we warn politicians to interfere”, 8/12/2012, Al Mada Press, <https://goo.gl/YtRTRM>



a large number of weapons such as IEDs, mortars and RPG in the region of Lita situated north east of Baqubah<sup>391</sup>. Other declines of operations claimed by the group sometimes coincided with the launch of security campaigns against it, such as in August 2013 with the campaign of “revenge to the martyrs” of ISF <sup>392</sup> or in December 2013, when the decrease in activity coincided with a campaign of arrests across the province with the dismantling according to the police of 8 terrorist cells<sup>393</sup>. Despite these successive campaigns, the total number of operations claimed maintained itself at around a mean of 85 operations per month between March 2013 and April 2014. It remained higher than the average of 71 operations per month claimed during the two and a half years of the study.

### **Protests and sectarian tensions**

In January of 2013, in Diyala appeared the local version of Iraqi spring protests, in which people gathered every Friday demanding for reforms and the end of militia impunity<sup>394</sup>. It started with the rise of tensions between the Sahawat tribes and the government forces about the payment of their salaries. The tribal reconciliation process brokered by the US in 2007 played a considerable role in the success of the anti-insurgency campaign. The number of tribal fighters forming part the Sahawat rose to 7000 militiamen. After the US withdrawal in 2011, the relationship between them and the central government began to worsen but never attained the point of no return which it had reached Anbar. With the employment by the Maliki government of Shia militias<sup>395</sup> at their expense,

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<sup>391</sup> “Seizing of a massive weapon cache in Northern East Baqubah”, Al Mada Press, 19/01/2013, <https://goo.gl/FwmQFC>

<sup>392</sup> “Dajla Operation command : “ Arrest of more than 1000 people during the month of august”” , 31/08/2013, Al Mada Press, <https://goo.gl/L8Xpg9>

<sup>393</sup> “Arrest of terrorists involved in the killing of 60 people”, Al Mada Press, 2/12/2013, <https://goo.gl/i8ncNA>

<sup>394</sup> “Diyala Authorities announce the founding of 12 bodies of youths and warns about the return of the “false control” of the governorate”, Al Mada Press, 20/11/2013, <https://goo.gl/WJrMPh>

<sup>395</sup>“Pro-Iranian forces such as Badr, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous,), Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH), Moqtada al-Sadr’s Saraya al-Salam (Peace Companies), and Sayyid al-Shuhada.

their number and influence began to drop. The nomination of the Badr organisation's leader Hadi al Ameri as the provincial security chief in Diyala confirmed this tendency. These protests and the political rivalries between the provincial governor, the security forces, the movement of protests and Shia militias initiated a period of political turmoil and sectarian violence not only imputed to IS. After this period, the number of operations oscillated between 100 and 50 operations per month. Curiously, it did not have an impact on IS' activities from January to March of 2013. However, after the Safiya bombing on a mosque of Sunni protestors in April 2014 and the outcry it generated among the Sunni community, the number of operations claimed by the group rose to attain a peak of 110 operations.

As described by Jessica Lewis, during the "Breaking the Walls" campaign, 20% of the 30 VBIEDs exploding during the first days of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign on July 23, 2012, were detonated in Diyala, and more precisely in Muqdadidyah. Later, the number of VBIED attacks decreased for two possible reasons: the dismantling of its local VBIED cell by the Tigris Operations Command on August, 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013 or the deployment of the cells to neighbouring provinces. Targeted assassinations against high-value targets were carried out against the chief of the police of Diyala with two IEDs in December 2013<sup>396</sup> and the governor of the province.

HBIEDs were used differently than in the other provinces, where they have targeted militiamen and militaries. In a context of sectarian violence, they have been used in order to push the Shia population to migrate, as was reported in Muqdadidyah in October 2013. Assassinations and IED attacks have increased at the expense of armed attacks; this trend may support the idea that the group has established more presence and are more embedded in the population in order to carry out specific attacks. In rural areas, the group also started to

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<sup>396</sup>"The chief of police survives after an attack", Al Mada Press,3/12/2013, <https://goo.gl/MD2w6L>

assassinate the local village state representatives, called “Mokhtar”<sup>397</sup>. Diyala terrain is sustainable for prolonged guerrilla warfare because of the rural safe havens where fighters can seek sanctuaries. As explained by Michael Knights, Diyala remains “the perfect terrain in Iraq for insurgents seeking to shelter from security forces”<sup>398</sup>.

At the start of the “Breaking the Walls” campaign, a Kurdish media<sup>399</sup> reported that the group had extended its control over the northern town of Saadiyah. It was also reported that in November of 2011 it had tried to infiltrate the city of Al Wakf (east of Baqubah). These zones are traditional areas of support that were under the group’s total control back in 2006-2008. The other specificity of IS’ operations in the province is that it constitutes the one that has the higher number of what the statistics of the group called “repentants” which could be described as Sunni members from the security forces or the state apparatus declaring repentance. Diyala is also a laboratory for the group’s activity because IS can target the Shia community in the same area where it has its support base and causes population displacement. Towards the Sunni component, it can rely on a punishment campaign against collaborators and the negative perception of the local Iraqi police by the Sunni population. Many accusations of torture and mistreatments have been directed at the security forces infiltrated by Shia militias. They are believed to be behind the extra-judiciary killings of terrorist suspects and the displaying of their bodies throughout the streets of the cities of Diyala.<sup>400</sup>

### **Confrontational operations**

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<sup>397</sup> “The Dajla operation command thwarts the escape of 10 leader of Al Qaeda from Hib Hib prison”, Burath News, 20/09/2012, <http://burathanews.com/arabic/news/170255>

<sup>398</sup> Michael Knights and Alex Mello, “Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala: How the Islamic State Could Exploit Iraq’s Sectarian Tinderbox”, CTC Sentinel, October 2016

<sup>399</sup> “Kurds terrorized by armed groups in Iraq’s Diyala province,” Kurd net, 8/07/2012, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/7/kurdsiniraq169.htm>.

<sup>400</sup> “The Iraqi army displays bodies in the street”, Al Mada Press, 16/11/2012, <https://goo.gl/RTL6gZ>

The curve of confrontational operations is also sinusoid but has another shape. The growth is more moderate while the cycles are more extended in time. The peak corresponded to specific spectacular attacks such as SVBIED operations against three poll centres<sup>401</sup> and at Shia pilgrims coming from Iranian or meetings held by Kurdish political groups. By the deliberate targeting of civilians, the group in Diyala was following a clear “punishment strategy”. Curiously, confrontational operations such as SVBIEDs were used to conduct targeted assassinations<sup>402</sup>. This shows that the control of the terrain was not as developed in Mosul in order to use smooth methods for targeted assassinations. Confrontational operations were used as part of IS’ punishment strategy with a broader objective of igniting a sectarian war in the province by targeting civilians with less restraint than in Nineveh.

The Ramadan effect cannot be observed in Diyala unlike in other provinces for the total of the operations. In 2012, the peak of operations occurred in May and June 2012 during the provincial elections, while it decreased by almost 50% during the Ramadan period. However, the number of confrontational operations followed the Ramadan peak cycle. Throughout the study’s timeframe, the number of operations remained very limited with a maximum of 10 per month, reached three times in Ramadan 2012, 2013 and in April 2014. Another month corresponding to a peak of operations was the one of Moharam; this coincided with Ashura days and the influx of Shia pilgrims likely to be targeted in the province. Diyala constituted a base for projecting attacks against the enemy’s centre and a base for controlling territories. In 2013, it claimed the establishment of six checkpoints, which demonstrates the group’s relative freedom of manoeuvring and goal to establish territorial control. The peak of direct operations in confronting the enemy was attained in March 2014 with 25 confrontational operations. On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, IS launched a complex urban assault on Buhriz, seizing the city centre and mosques from which it relayed messages from the loudspeaker. The city was reconquered two days later by the security forces

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<sup>401</sup> “Dozens killed in an explosion in Poll Centre”, Al Mada Press, 6/5/2013, <https://goo.gl/CkPQFs>

<sup>402</sup> “The governor of the province was targeted by an SVBIED”, Al Mada Press, 23/02/2013, <https://goo.gl/7Nt7zd>

supported by Shia militias. Before this assault, the number of operations claimed reached its maximum in January and February of 2014.

Finally, IS' figures show us precisely why the Diyala province, despite its growing activity, did not succeed in what Anbar, Salahudeen and Nineveh achieved in 2014. In comparison to Nineveh, where there was an average of 387 operations claimed, of which 77 were confrontational ones, Diyala registered an average of 71 operations per month with only 16 confrontational operations. Unlike other regions, Diyala is far from the Syrian border, which makes it very hard to take profit of IS' gains there in terms of resources and logistical support. In Diyala IS has also to fight a myriad of enemies composed of the US, the Sahawat and powerful Shia militias that had limited presence in Nineveh or Anbar. Compared to other provinces, the variation of the claimed operations in Diyala is peculiar. The variation of the total of operations and non-confrontational operations (which are similar) was sinusoidal with general growth in the number of operations claimed from which we can draw a linear positive trend line. The number of claimed operations goes up and down with a variation in the volume of operations claimed of nearly 50% each month. From November 2011 to February 2014, the number of operations claimed was multiplied by 5. Despite this overall growth in activity, it appears that Diyala Province could not sustain the same number of attacks for two consecutive months and needed a rest period of a month. This operational pace could be explained with two possible reasons: the effects of the counterinsurgency campaign of the Iraqi forces and the relocation of its efforts to neighbouring provinces (Baghdad, Kirkuk and South Salahudeen). The confrontational operations' variation does not follow a visible trend line, which shows the difficulty for the group to sustain this kind of operation for consecutive months in the province. From November 2011, when no confrontational operations were claimed to February 2014, when the urban assault on Buhriz was carried out, the group increased its capacity to confront the ISF and mount a complex assault on a city with enough power to outmanoeuvre its defenders and hold it for several hours. However, unlike the provinces where the group was able to hold territory, the volume of confrontational operations was still low in Diyala. The data never lay three standard deviations from the mean, unlike in other provinces (Tables 7 and 8).





Map of Baghdad Source ISW

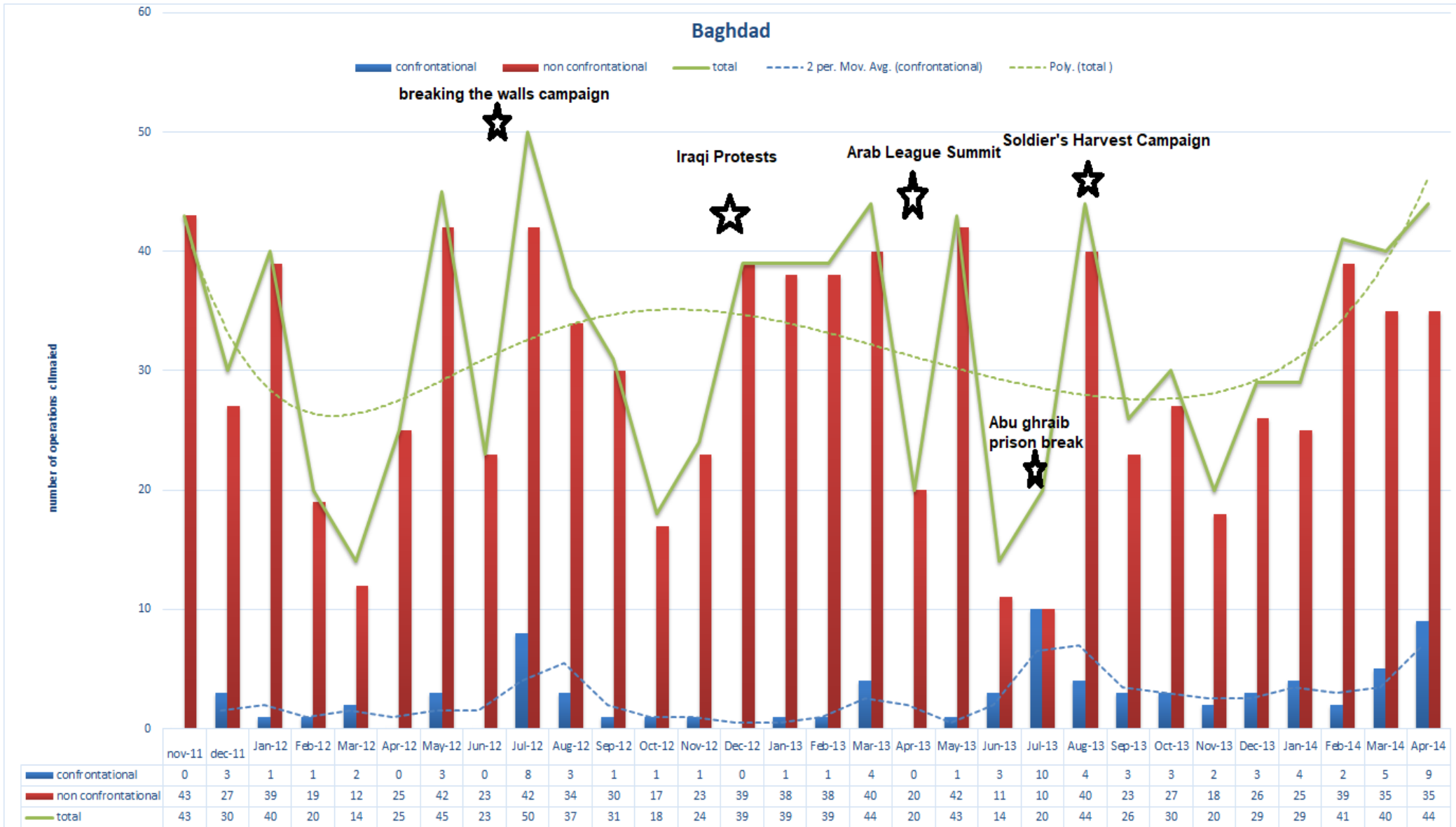


Figure 9 Evolution of operations claimed by IS in Baghdad per month from November 2011 to April 2014.



#### 4-Baghdad (figure 9)

From IS' figures, Baghdad Province has proven to be another singular case. It adopted non-confrontational tactics in most of its operations, as in other provinces. The operational pace of the province resembles the one of Diyala following trimester cycles. The city's environment is an important factor in explaining this trend. IS had lost the territorial control it over neighbourhoods in the capital in 2007. In 2009 and 2010, it marked its return to the city by carrying out massive signature attacks against symbolic targets. From 2012, its objective was not to target or harass the security forces, but the focus was expanded to the population. The idea behind harassing the population and attacking soft targets lies behind the fact that constant targeting of the capital would force the security forces to stay in order to secure soft targets and hence divert their efforts in the rest of the country. Unlike the rest of the other provinces, Baghdad Province did not report a high number of IED operations. However, it witnessed many more VBIEDs than in the other provinces. In 2013, almost 50% of all the VBIEDs claimed in Iraq by the organisation were detonated in Baghdad. The target of the attacks remained the same by concentrating the operations on civilian targets in the Shia neighbourhood and some security forces personnel. From a logistical point of view, IEDs are easier to make than VBIEDS. However, they are more difficult to deploy, especially in hostile urban environments. The streets of Baghdad are not as safe for IS' cells as the roads in the deserts of Anbar or Nineveh or the vegetation of Diyala. The intended goal behind the use of VBIEDs instead of IEDs also differs. IS often uses VBIEDs in Baghdad to create a large number of casualties, targeting Shia neighbourhoods. These operations demonstrate its strength and degrade the population's confidence in the government. It had targeted mostly Shia neighbourhoods such as Sadr City, Kamaliya, Saidiya, Karrada, Husseiniya, and Kadimiyah. The targeting of these areas consequently increased the tensions between the government and its opposition coming from its extremist fringe and their leaders such as Bettata, the

leader of Hezbollah Iraq<sup>403</sup> or Moqtada Al Sadr. The government of Iraq was condemned by them to be incompetent, corrupted or even responsible for these attacks.

### **VBIED and SVEST operations as the most used operations**

The other particularity of Baghdad Province's tactical pattern was the extensive use of SVEST operations as its principal confrontational weapon. In 2013, 50% of the operations in Iraq evolving SVESTs were conducted in Baghdad. The question this raises is why at the same time did only a few SVBIED operations take place (eight exactly) while 250 VBIEDs were detonated. One possible explanation is that the province was under-resourced in manpower. However, from IS' figures, the number of SVEST operations in Baghdad was the highest in Iraq with 97 operations during 2 and half years, which is very high and demonstrates that the province did not suffer from a shortage of manpower. Then, why did these suicide bombers not use cars for SVBIED operations instead of walking? The first explanation would be that counter security measures and particularly curfews imposed by the Iraqi authorities prevented IS' suicide bombers from using cars. However, this explanation is not satisfactory because VBIED operations took place regularly across the capital. The other possible explanation that we could advance has to do with the tactical dimension of this modus operandi for IS' strategists. IS in Baghdad follows a punishment strategy of urban terrorism and not a classic guerrilla strategy aimed at military targets. SVBIED operations, as we explained, are the group's version of artillery and are used mostly in a military context in order to break enemy lines or destroy a fixed and protected target. In Baghdad, they were used in the so-called "signature attacks" such as on the infamous UN headquarter bombing of 2003 or the 2010 bombing of ministries. They were also used during the spectacular prison attacks of Taji and Abu Ghraib. Nevertheless, this confrontational weapon, unlike VBIEDs, is not designed or used for the daily urban terror type of operations against civilians but rather for rare spectacular attacks.

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<sup>403</sup> "Battata : "We warned about today's explosion and the government is responsible for the killings"", Al Mada press, 17/02/2013, <https://goo.gl/tYsJDf>

SVEST operations are the main confrontational type of operation used in Baghdad, mostly against civilian targets. Detonated in confined areas, they are very lethal. Generally committed by a bomber in civilian clothes, the primary targets are civilian facilities or administrative buildings that lack efficient detection devices. The suicide bomber operation is less costly and more efficient in being able to reach confined places such as buildings or funeral tents rather than explosives packed in a car. In the case of inghimassi attacks, it is a more precise modus operandi than an SVBIED. Historically, foreign fighters were more prone to conducting suicide operations in Iraq<sup>404</sup>. Given this historical fact, we may assume because of the high number of SVEST operations in Baghdad that foreign fighters may be organised and dispatched on a national basis by a central command towards Baghdad. From the selected sample of operations claimed by the group, almost 50% of such operations in Iraq were claimed in Baghdad. For such operations, the origin of the perpetrator was not systematically indicated. For Baghdad Province, I could only identify three foreign suicide bombers in 2013 and 2014. One was named Muhajir, an immigrant and two others were from the Levant and Libya. For the rest of the SVEST operations in Baghdad, it was an Iraqi or the bomber's origin was not mentioned. Therefore, it is possible that the assumption that the majority of the suicide bombers were foreigners was true in 2003-2007 from the Sinjar document, but for our study on the 2012-2014 phase, it does not appear to be the case. This may confirm a more recent trend among the group we presented in the literature, which is its "Iraqisation". This time this refers not only to its leadership but also to its foot soldiers and the ones carrying out "martyrdom operations".

### **Baghdad's operational pace evolution towards the Abu Ghraib operation**

Regarding the volume and evolution of IS' operations in Baghdad, the province is less active compared to the other provinces. There is no aspiration for the group to hold territory at all. The activity there is to inflict damages, break the social unity, divert the Iraqi Army and increase the pressure on the

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<sup>404</sup> Joseph Felter, Brian Fishman, "Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records", West Point Combating terrorism Centre, December 19, 2007, <http://tarpley.net/docs/CTCForeignFighter.19.Dec07.pdf>

government. The evolution of the curve is sinusoidal, in a way that the group cannot sustain a rise of activity for consecutive months. It needs logistical pauses due perhaps to tighter controls of security in the capital. The most common measure is the imposition of curfews or the interdiction of vehicles. The most striking example of the success of such measures was the dramatic decrease of activity the group witnessed in Baghdad in late March and April 2013. To prepare for the Arab League summit on 27<sup>th</sup> of March, nearly 100,000 ISF were deployed to Baghdad to provide security and control its entrances<sup>405</sup>. During that period, only one S-VEST operation took place, no VBIED attacks were reported, and only two rockets were fired towards the Green Zone. Similarly, in April 2013, the provincial elections in Baghdad took place on the 20<sup>th</sup>; the Baghdad Province only claimed 20 operations for that month. During that period the number of non-confrontational operations decreased. The cells for non-confrontational operations were likely in a pause during the previous months and rested ahead of the attack on Abu Ghraib planned for July 13<sup>th</sup>. During that operation VBIEDs, IEDs and mortars were used extensively. The peak of confrontational operations can be observed during the month of Ramadan when the attack on Abu Ghraib took place. Another peak of operations can also be observed from February 2014. The conflict escalation in Anbar, where open confrontations took place, saw another increase in Baghdad of non-confrontational operations (VBIEDs) as well as confrontational operations with SVESTs. As a result of this surge of activity, the Iraqi authorities had to maintain troops stationed in Baghdad<sup>406</sup>, in particular after the reports emerging that IS' cells infiltrated the wave of 22 000 refugees coming from Anbar<sup>407</sup>. Overall, there was not much variation in the number of operations claimed per month, so no trend line emerged from the study. The number of operations claimed in November of 2011 was about 40, which

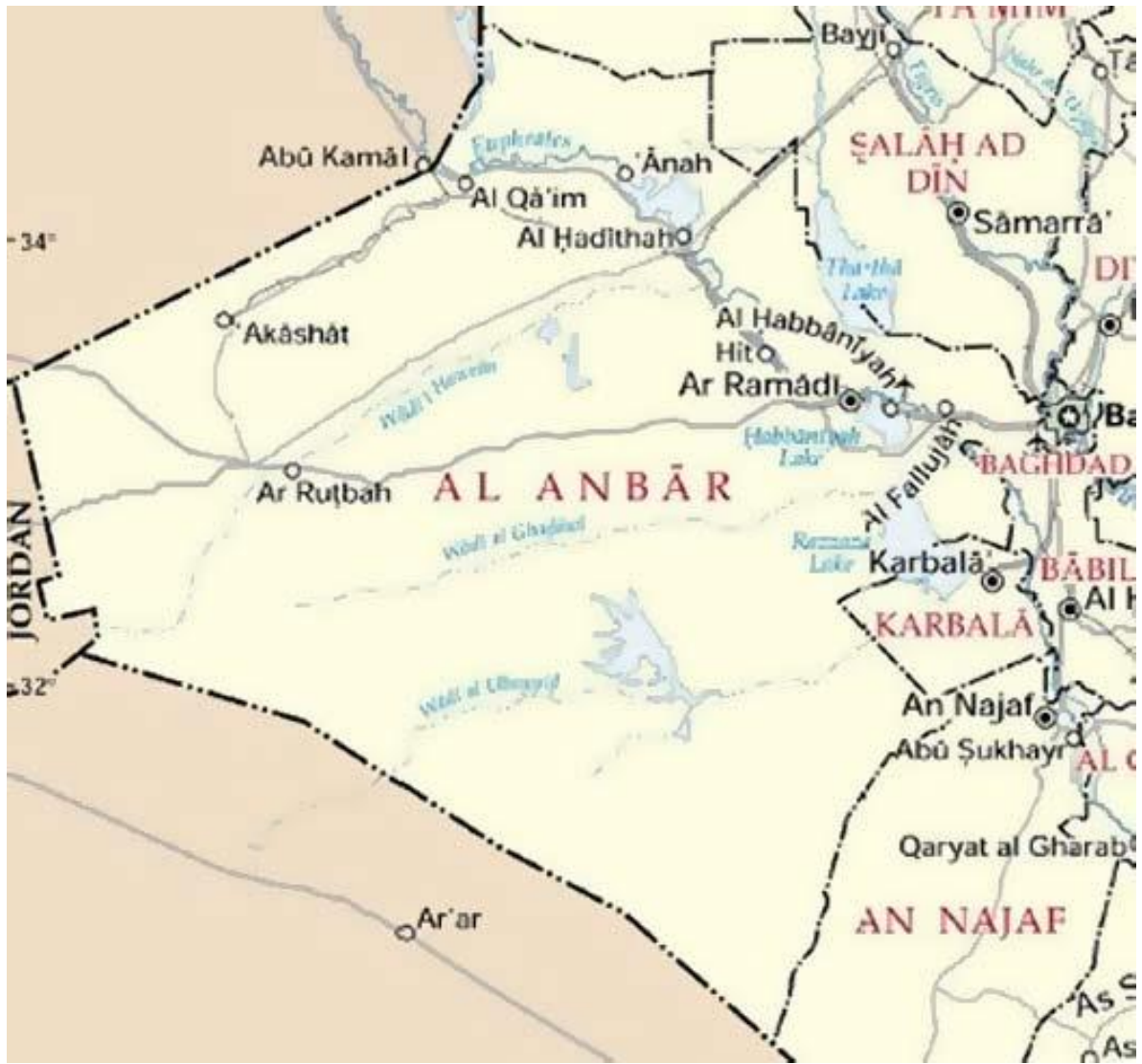
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<sup>405</sup> "Arab League summit on 27th of March", BBC News, 26/09/2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-17510663>

<sup>406</sup> GOI, MOI Deputy of Federal Security Affairs, press release, "The MOI Takes Over Security in Provinces instead of the MOD in July", 2/6/2012, [www.moi.gov.iq/ArticlePrint](http://www.moi.gov.iq/ArticlePrint) .

<sup>407</sup> "Deployment of SWAT forces in Baghdad after intelligence reports indicating the entrance of Daech fighters in Baghdad disguised as refugees", Al Mada Press, 23/01/2014, <https://goo.gl/tLf8yW>

corresponds to the same in March of 2014. We should note that July 2013 was the month with less non-confrontational operations and more confrontational operations, the only one for the whole study where we could observe this ratio. The complex spectacular attack in Abu Ghraib is described and analysed in depth in part 5 of the study; it was extraordinary for the group and explains this observation. The number of operations for the first time was two standard deviations from the mean. For the month of Ramadan, a peak of operations is observable; in July 2012 and 2013 the group was much more active compared to the rest of the year. Again, for both months the number of operations claimed was two standard deviations from the mean.



Map of Anbar Province

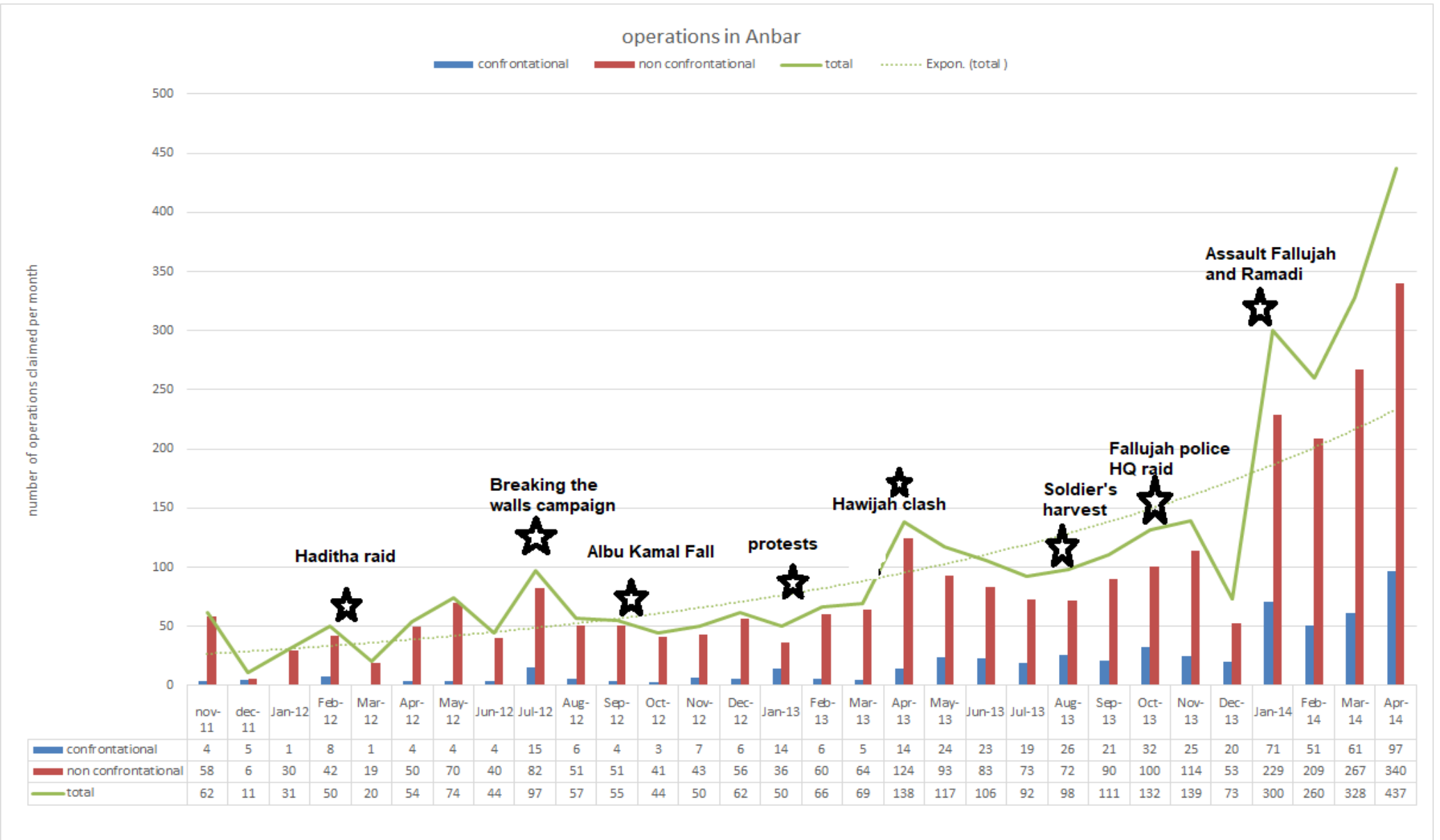


Figure 10 Evolution of operations claimed by IS in Anbar per month from November 2011 to April 2014.

## 5-Anbar (figure 10)

During the US occupation, Anbar was paramount for the IS because of its unique social composition with tribes having the same origin and the same sectarian orientation. It was considered a perfect social incubator for the group before the backlash of the tribes. IS held great importance for the region for its proximity to the Syrian border. It granted them access to a significant flux of foreign fighters in the 2000s and a sustainable line of communication. During the period following the US withdrawal in late 2011 and after being pushed out from the cities, it retreated to the remote areas of the governorate. These areas remain almost impossible to monitor for the security forces because of how vast they are (its size equals two Gulf countries) and the consequently ridiculous human resources it needs to stabilise it. In general, in the Anbar Province, IS' tactical manoeuvring was to avoid confrontation with the Iraqi Army and the Sahawat. It developed a guerrilla strategy in the urban environment and a "hit and run" tactic in the countryside and the desert region. The variation of the curve of operation claimed is different from Diyala and Baghdad in the sense that IS could maintain an increase in the number of operation for consecutive months. We can observe two main phases in the variation of the volume of operations claimed by the group with a turning point situated at the beginning of 2013.

### **From November 11 to January 2013**

IS' figures started quite low compared to those in Nineveh with few operations claimed while many of them happened in the desert region. In the Anbar desert, IS cells could move fast from camp to camp and erect mobile training facilities. At the time of the US withdrawal, the group's activity there was at its lowest level ever with only 11 operations claimed in January 2012. Nevertheless, in early 2012 it executed significant operations targeting ISF like in Haditha, where it stormed the city disguised with police uniforms and arrested and executed members of the security forces<sup>408</sup>. This episode was recorded and

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<sup>408</sup>"Iraq attacks in Haditha 'kill 27 policemen", BBC news, March 5, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17255047>.



broadcast in its propaganda video series entitled “Saleel Sawareem”. During the following months, the volume of activity steadily rose following an exponential trend line. The increase of activity during 2012 was periodical following a trimester cycle. In other words, the province sustained two months of expansion in its activity followed by one month of decrease. The Ramadan peak of operation can be observed in 2012 and corresponded to the announcement of the “Breaking the Walls” campaign. This campaign did not trigger an increase in the number of operations in the governorate. The number of operations claimed it remained stable at around fifty operations per month during the eight following months until January 2013.

Anbar Province did not participate much in the “Breaking the Walls” campaign with few VBIED operations carried out and no prison break attempts. As part of “the Breaking the Walls” campaign effort, some VBIEDs were detonated in the governorate in September 2012. However, according to Jessica Lewis, the fact that those attacks were not synchronised with others in Iraq may indicate that at that time “the cell had difficulty communicating with the rest of the VBIED organisation, or that it suffered from some other constraint”<sup>409</sup>. This was in contrast to Anbar, where 55 VBIEDs exploded in 2012 and 2013 and the southern province that is close geographically witnessed 175. It is more likely that, as suggested by Stern, VBIED cells in Anbar were redirected to target Shia urban centres in the south and Baghdad later in 2013.

The ability of the group to establish control and manoeuvre freely in the porous Syrian Iraqi border area has been a vital goal for the Anbar Province. ISF repeatedly conducted raids and military campaigns to secure this vast area. In January 2013, an operation in the border between Iraq, Syria and Jordan destroyed a training camp and the arrests and killings of 18 members<sup>410</sup>. This coincided with the decrease of operations claimed by the group during that period

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<sup>409</sup>Jessica D Lewis , “Al Qaeda in Iraq is resurgent part 1”, Middle East Security Report, September 2013, p29

<sup>410</sup> “Iraqi forces destroy a camp of AL Qaeda in the tri- border region in Anbar and kill and arrest 18”, Al Mada Press, 17/01/2013, <https://goo.gl/ko4NM4>

with only 50 operations claimed. In March and June 2013, other military campaigns<sup>411</sup> were orchestrated alongside the Syrian border as a response to the killing of six Iraqi soldiers by armed militants coming from the Syrian side. Despite its relative weakness in the region during that period, the group was able to display its forces and organise parades like in December of 2012 in Rutbah<sup>412</sup>. Those parades were more a show of force in order to intimidate the population rather than a manifestation of the group's capacity to hold terrain because of the relatively low number of confrontational operations at the same time.

As Michael Knights observed<sup>413</sup>, during the first half of 2013 the group conducted around eight to ten attacks per month in Ramadi's urban areas. The number doubled to an average of 20 attacks per month from September-December 2013. In terms of opportunities, this surge of IS attacks in the period of 2010-2013 created a "vicious" circle for the Sunni tribes, which were hostile to the government and this benefited the group. Indeed, more attacks on ISF in Al Anbar gave more excuses for Maliki's government to deploy additional forces from outside the governorates. Their extensive presence did resolve the security issues but consolidated Maliki's power over the local Sunni dignitaries, which were hostile to it. Knowing the collective mind of the Anbari and the hostility against any foreign occupation (US, even foreign jihadis or Shia forces), the more ISF forces were deployed, the more former insurgent forces (such as the 1920 revolutionary movement and the Islamic Army), and tribal leaders were prone to take arms against them.

#### **April 2013 to April 2014**

From April 2013 to April 2014, the average number of confrontational operations rose to 37 operations per month while it represented only six per

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<sup>411</sup> "Large security operation against armed groups along the Syrian borders after the killing of 7 border control guards", Al Mada Press, 11/04/2013, <https://goo.gl/mWkocZ>

<sup>412</sup> "Al Qaida displays its forces in Rutbah", Al Mada Press, 29/12/2012, <https://goo.gl/HhMfLM>

<sup>413</sup> Michael Knights, "The ISIL's Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor", CTC sentinel, May 2014, vol 7 issue 5, p8, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-isils-stand-in-the-ramadi-falluja-corridor>

month a year before. On the 23rd of April, many checkpoints were attacked<sup>414</sup> in Fallujah, in October of 2013, six inghimassi attacked the HQ of the police in Fallujah<sup>415</sup>, and several S-VEST attacks were claimed in Rawa targeting officials<sup>416</sup>. In May of 2013, the governor of the province, Kassem Fahdaoui, was targeted by an SVBIED operation. During the provincial elections, a Double S-VEST operation in June 2013 targeted a security compound in Ramadi<sup>417</sup>. November 2013 saw a peak in the volume of total operations claimed in 2013, reaching around 150 operations that month. In December 2013, we can observe a fall in the number of operations especially the non-confrontational ones. This may be due to the countermeasures undertaken by the authorities during that period. On the 9<sup>th</sup> November 2013, the authorities announced the arrest of dozens of IS' fighters in the south of Fallujah<sup>418</sup>. This could also have represented a necessary operational rest before new eve's urban assault. Compared to other provinces, Anbar Province had a high number of attacks using IEDs and assassinations. The police in Anbar found that most of the non-confrontational attacks were conducted by bicycles controlled at a distance<sup>419</sup>. It also took measures against the manufacture of tools that could be used for the manufacture of silenced weapons and mortars<sup>420</sup>.

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<sup>414</sup> "Fallujah announces a complete curfew on vehicles and individuals after attacks against the Federal police", Al Mada Press, 23/04/2013, <https://goo.gl/hbuLRj>

<sup>415</sup> "Suicide bombers and fighters attack Fallujah police HQ and seize control of the building in its vicinity", Al Mada Press, 21/10/2013, <https://goo.gl/X57486>

<sup>416</sup> "Source : "one of the suicide bombings in Rawah targeted administrative buildings and resulted in the killing and wounding of 25 people of whom local leaders", Al Mada Press, 20/10/2013, <https://goo.gl/gAQM4S>

<sup>417</sup> "The Anbar police elaborates a Security plan during Ramadan after receiving intel about possible attacks", Al Mada Press, 2/07/2013, <https://goo.gl/GqK56v>

<sup>418</sup> "Anbar police announce the arrest of high profile Al Qaeda suspects south of Fallujah", Al Mada Press, 9/11/2013, <https://goo.gl/kqCYnD>

<sup>419</sup> "Anbar police : assassinations and explosions are made with bicycle equipped with engines", Al Mada Press, 10/08/2013, <https://goo.gl/Tu8sid>

<sup>420</sup> "Security forces tighten their control of factories suspected of manufacturing of silenced weapons and mortars components", Al Mada Press, 4/11/2013, <https://goo.gl/UU2kdt>

Despite these measures, the number of confrontational and non-confrontational operations almost doubled between January and April 2014. During that period, IS was able to assert control over Fallujah and many parts of Ramadi. From January 2014 to April 2014, the number of operations increased dramatically due to the open confrontation against the Iraqi Army. Like in Nineveh, before the January urban assaults we can observe a decrease in the activity in the months preceding the assaults on both cities equivalent to the one in Nineveh in March and April of 2014 before the seizure of the city in June.

### **The spark of the Anbar protest movement**

The protests in Al Anbar were triggered on 21<sup>st</sup> December 2012 by a raid on the home of Sunni Finance Minister, Rafi al-Issawi, who was from Fallujah and the arrest of ten of his bodyguards. Since 2006, his tribe, the Albu Issa, had been the principal component of the Sahawat force against the ISI. Despite their conflict with the central government, the IS still targeted this tribe by killing one of its principal leaders, Shaykh Aifan al-Issawi,<sup>421</sup> in January of 2013.

The year of 2013 saw an escalation in the political Sunni Arab opposition against the government of Nuri al-Maliki through demonstrations as well as violence. He refused to incorporate the Sahawat into the Iraqi National Army in order to keep Shias as the dominant force in the Army and targeted all his competitors, whom he accused of being terrorists<sup>422</sup>. All of a sudden, thousands of Sahawat fighters who were the pillar for the Petraeus anti-ISI strategy in Anbar saw their wages cut. He also accused some Sahawat leaders of being responsible for terrorist

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<sup>421</sup> "Killing of the sheikh Eifan Al Isawi", Al Akhbar Newspaper, 16 January 2013, <https://al-akhbar.com/Arab/44724>

<sup>422</sup> A State of Law official declared: "We are confident we will win. We are already collecting documents proving the affiliation of Sunni politicians with al-Qaeda, and we are determined to unveil this before the elections". See Crisis Group report on Fallujah. "Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain", Crisis Group Middle East, Report N°150, 28 April 2014, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-falluja-s-faustian-bargain>

attacks or of having ties with ISI.<sup>423</sup> This lack of confidence with the Sahawat in Anbar pushed the Maliki government to establish a new Sahawat movement<sup>424</sup> of 2500 tribal fighters in the summer of 2013. Led by Ahmed Al Hardan, it rose against the old movement led by Ahmed Abu Risha, who was one of the figures of the movement protest against Al Maliki. ISF in Anbar was commanded by the commander of Anbar, the General Rashid Falih Al Hanafi. The 1<sup>st</sup> division based in Ramadi; the 7<sup>th</sup> division in Baghdadi, the 10<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> armoured division, the Golden Division for anti-terrorists tasks and the 6<sup>th</sup> division of the Federal Police composed the forces deployed in the province. They represented 60 000 soldiers supported by around 10 000 pro-government tribal fighters<sup>425</sup> .

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2013, another arrest warrant in Ramadi was issued against the Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Iraqi Islamic Party parliamentarian, Ahmad al Alwani. When his bodyguards from his tribes tried to resist, a firefight resulted in the death of Ali al-Alwani and his sister, as well as the arrest of MP Ahmad al Alwani. They were from the Albu Alwan and Albu Jabr tribes, considered as a pillar of the Sahawat movement in Ramadi. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of December, the governmental forces decided with the Provincial Council to storm the protest camps in Fallujah and Ramadi with forces from outside the province. Shia forces coming from the southern city of Kut were deployed, which sparked a backlash from tribes as well as the groups from the Sunni insurgency. The Ramadi-based Anbar Provincial Council negotiated a withdrawal of Iraqi Army and Emergency Response Brigade forces from Ramadi on December 31<sup>st</sup>. I describe and analyse the urban assaults on Ramadi and Fallujah in the section

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<sup>423</sup>“Maliki reopens the case of Sahawat leaders”, Al Jazeera Net, 22/01/2012, <https://goo.gl/Mh8iXs>

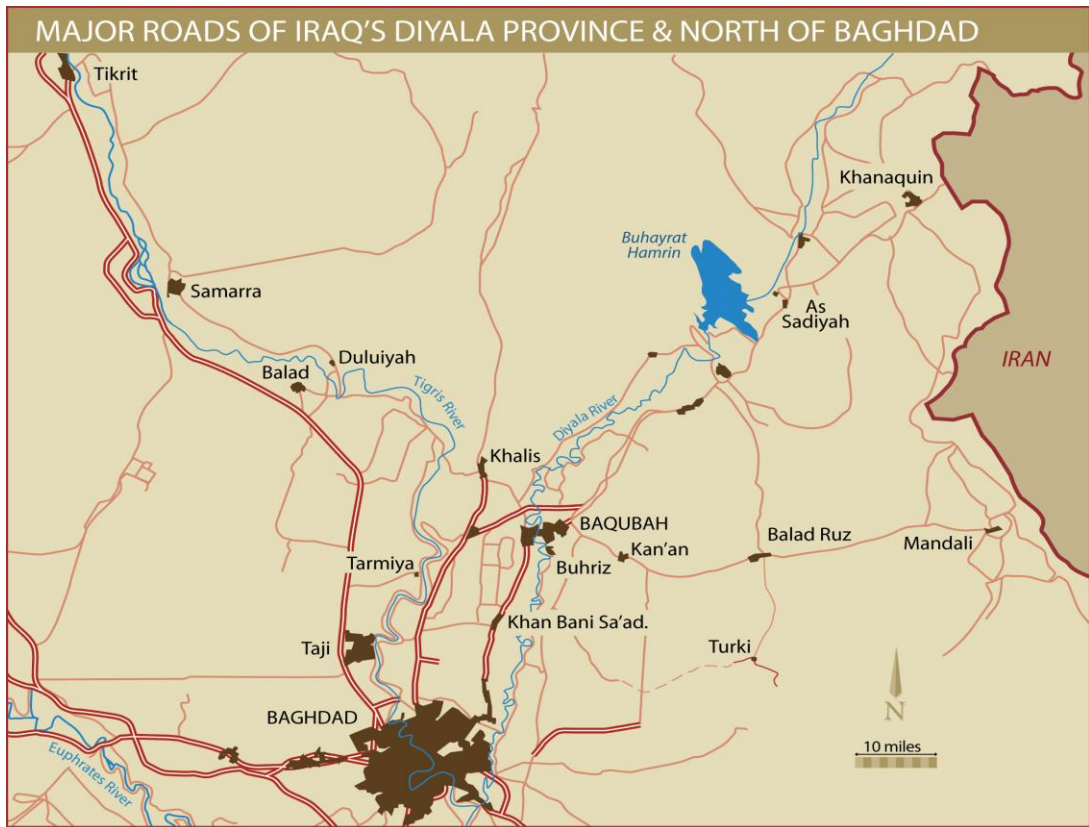
<sup>424</sup>Hisham Al Hashimi, *A'Alam Daech*, (Lit ISIS' world), Hikma Publishing and distribution London, 2016

<sup>425</sup> ibid

dedicated to the strategical analysis of IS' successes through the indirect approach.

To conclude this part on the quantitative analysis of the variations of claimed operations per month in Anbar, we can observe that the variation of operations claimed followed an exponential trend line confirming the surge in the group's capacity in the province. The group's operational rhythm followed a semester tempo with a rise during the six months followed by a decrease in the following months. IS' figures show that from November 2011 to December 2013, the number of operations claimed oscillated between 50 and 150 operations per month. However, in January 2014, the number increased sharply from 73 to 300 operations per month. Unlike Nineveh where the increase of operations was massive, in Anbar, the increase of the group's military activity was not as important before the launch of the assaults in both cities. Less than a proactive operation, the urban assaults on Ramadi and Fallujah were more a reaction to the deterioration of the security and the opportunity presented by the tensions between tribes and Baghdad. However, the variation of the confrontational operations followed an exponential trend line, where the increase in the number of operations started in May of 2013 following Hawijah clashes and the spillover of violence across the country. While before that date, the average number of operational confrontations was around six operations per month, it tripled to reach an average of 24 operations per month during the six months preceding the urban assaults on the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah. Later, during the four first months of 2014, the average number of confrontational operations was 70 per month. Regarding the Ramadan peak, only one is observable in July 2012.





Map of Northern Baghdad Sources ISW



Map of Salahudeen Province Source Google Map



SNB

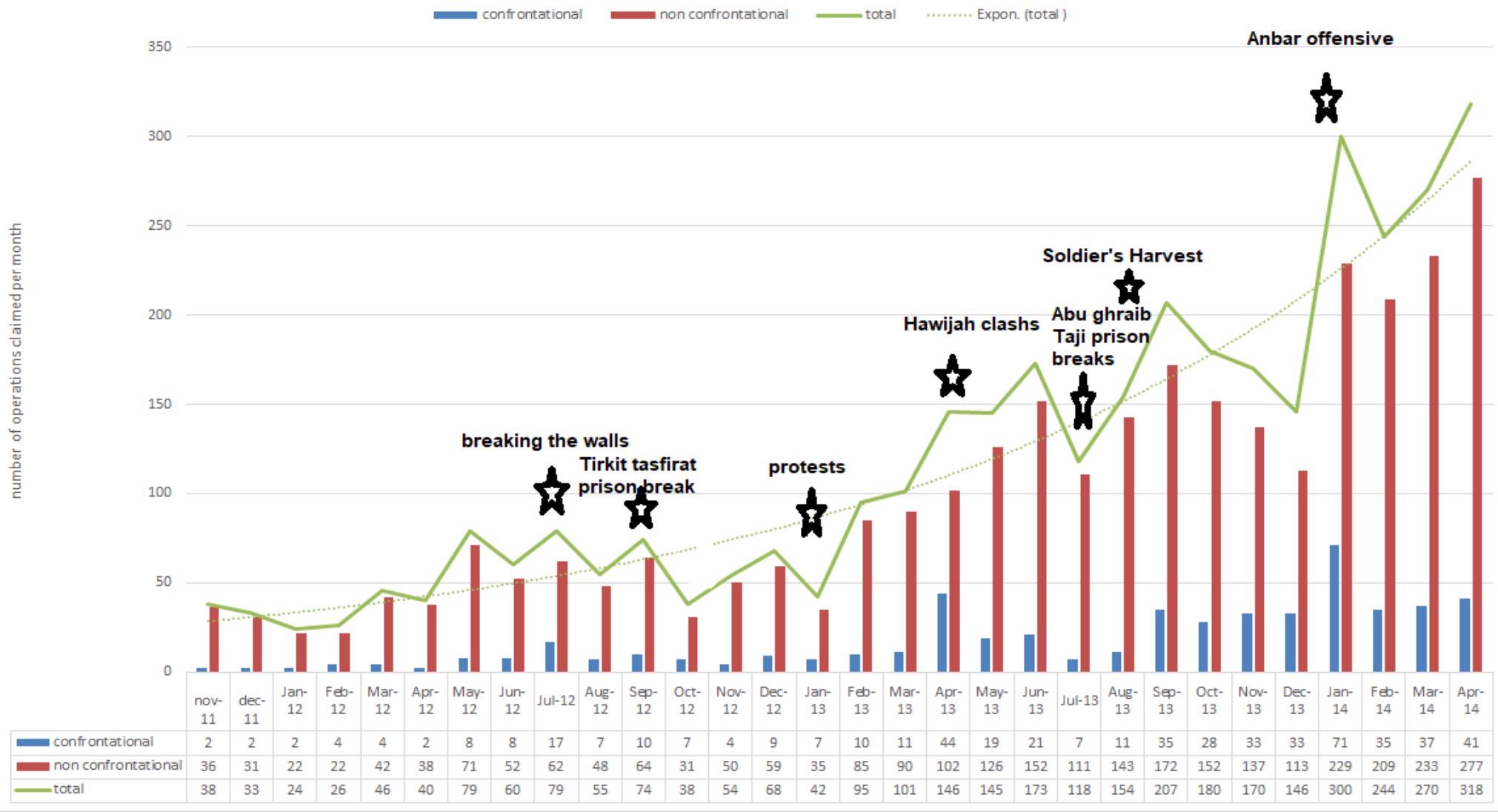


Figure 11 Evolution of operations claimed by IS in Salahudeen and Northern Baghdad per month from November 2011 to April 2014

## 6-Salahudeen and Northern Baghdad (figure 11)

Salahudeen and Northern Baghdad provinces (SNB) were treated by IS as a single operating area in both annual reports of 1434 and 1435. However, from December 2013, each province started to have its monthly report. This restructuration manifested a change in the structure as well as in the number of operations and objectives for each province. Salahudeen Province includes the principal cities of Tikrit, Balad, Samarra and Baiji while Northern Baghdad has the cities of Al Taji and Tarmiyah. One of the explanations of the 2012-2013 merging of both structures is their synchronisation both at the strategic and operational levels for the objectives stated in the framework of the “Breaking the Walls” campaign. Almost all the prisons raided successfully or not were present in Baghdad and Salahudeen provinces: Tasfirat in Tikrit, Taji in Northern Baghdad and Abu Ghraib in Baghdad. The independence of Salahudeen province from late 2013 confirmed later its readiness for the 2014 campaign in the north and its role in the takeover of Mosul.

The SNB province represented 19.7% of total operations in 2013 while in 2012 it represented 12.7%. Most of the attacks were not confrontational at 85%, with only 15% of confrontational operations. The group followed a strategy of guerrilla warfare with a gradual increase of confrontational operations from March of 2013 to April 2014 (multiplied by 3). In 2012 and 2013, the number of assassinations, indirect fire, destruction of houses, targeted attacks, and IEDs increased. In comparison, very few confrontational operations such as SVBIEDs and SVESTs operations were carried out. Unlike in other provinces, many homes were destroyed by VBIEDs and this resulted in high casualties among the families and the neighbours. These operations pushed the security forces to impose a curfew on vehicles. Targeted assassinations of high-value targets were carried out in provinces such as in Anbar, Diyala and Nineveh. The chief of the police of Salahudeen was targeted in the centre of Tikrit twice by two simultaneous IEDs

in February of 2013 and 2014 with a VBIED<sup>426</sup>. The governor of Salahudeen was also targeted three times, in December 2012 and in June and September 2013 by a complex attack involving the use of IEDs and a VBIED during an ambush using light weapons. For both cases, attackers had previous knowledge of their target's route and were able to carry out accurate attacks that confirm the group's extensive intelligence network in the province.

Attacks on prisons held great importance during the "Breaking the Walls" campaign in SNB Province. The attack upon the Tikrit Tasfirat prison on September 27, 2012, was highly successful. Over 60 ISFs were killed or wounded, and 100 prisoners escaped. In July 2013, the Taji prison, situated in northern Baghdad was attacked with mortars and SVBIEDs. Even though the region is composed mainly of Sunnis, it holds a highly symbolical value for the Shia creed. It holds some of the most sacred shrines and religious places such as the Askari shrine, whose bombing in 2006 ignited two years of sectarian war across the country. There is also the shrine of Said Mohamed in Balad and the shrine of Imam Mahdi mountadar as well, the place, where according to Shia scriptures, the Mahdi is said to have disappeared and is expected to come back. These elements explain the group's eagerness to conduct operations specifically targeting Shia civilians or pilgrims.<sup>427</sup> For those reasons, security measures are usually taken by ISF and Shia militias for religious processions or religious holidays. SVESTs as a confrontational type of operations are usually used to target these groups and inflict as much as possible damage, as occurred in Toz Khurmato.<sup>428</sup> The city of Samarra was also a place of tensions between locals, which are Sunni in the majority, and the army. Most of the army stationed there are from the southern region and Shias. Residents protested and called for a

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<sup>426</sup> "Chief of Police of Salahudine survives an attempted assassination in Toz involving twice synchronized IEDs explosions resulting in the killing of seven people", Al Mada Press, 19/02/2014, <https://goo.gl/nzUaMt>

<sup>427</sup> "Thwarting of a suicide bombing targeting Iranian pilgrims South of Tikrit", Al Mada Press, 14/05/2013, <https://goo.gl/5L2BVX>

<sup>428</sup> "Dozens of killed and wounded in a suicide bombing targeting funerals of Turkmens in Tuz Khurmato", Al Mada Press, 23/01/2013, <https://goo.gl/zeJrwo>

strike<sup>429</sup> in October of 2013 calling for the deployment of the local police and the Sahawat (mostly Sunnis) in their city. In Tarmiyah, a religious maqam was attacked by IS in an attempt to ignite sectarian tensions in the province.<sup>430</sup>

We can observe three different phases in the evolution of IS' claimed operations in the SNB province. From November 2011 to January 2013, we observe a sinusoidal curve, meaning that the group could not sustain a prolonged effort in its activity and needed an operational rest period of a month. The number of operations claimed reached an average of 50 operations per month. From January to June 2013, there was a continuous and important increase in operations from 48 to 170. The governorate of Salahudeen saw the emergence of a protest movement led by Sunni tribes and political parties in January 2013. In February, the police tried to disrupt the movement by forbidding strangers from entering the city of Samara to join the protestors<sup>431</sup>. Clashes between protestors regrouped in camps, and the police started in Samarra in March 2013<sup>432</sup>. Tensions between local authorities and the government rose at the same time. In Toz Khormato, local authorities called for the creation of a local force composed of different ethnic elements of the region. This call was viewed with suspicion from Baghdad. The "*Kaymakam*", a local leader of the district, also asked to remove Shia symbols and flags from the city<sup>433</sup>. Tensions between the Sahawat and the security forces also worsened after the decision of the Army to exercise direct control on them in January 2013. In an attempt to call Baghdad for more decentralisation of power especially regarding security affairs, the governor of

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<sup>429</sup>"The people from Samarra call for the return of their sons to police inside the city", Al Mada Press, 13/10/2013, <https://goo.gl/Zsk8VG>

<sup>430</sup>"Death toll of the attempt of storming of Qaim Maqaim in Tarmiyah reaches 29 killed and wounded", Al Mada Press, 3/12/2013, <https://goo.gl/ddfK18>

<sup>431</sup>"Security forces forbid the entrance of Samara and Tikrit to non-residents", Al Mada Press, 15/02/2013, <https://goo.gl/uuv8qp>

<sup>432</sup> "Clashes between the police and protestors in the protestors' camps in Tikrit", Al Mada Press , 29/03/2013, <https://goo.gl/MGSBAa>

<sup>433</sup> "Kaymakam of Tuz calls for the withdraw of sectarian flags and symbols from the street", Al Mada Press, <https://goo.gl/XXY6zL>

Salahudeen pointed out to the lack of executive power in the hand of the governor to explain the deterioration of the security situation from which IS took advantage<sup>434</sup>. This declaration echoes one of the local councils of Salahudeen affirming that the transfer of power regarding security affairs could lead to a decrease of 80% of violence in the province<sup>435</sup>.

After these tensions appeared, the activity of the province continuously increased with no rest to triple from 50 to 150 operations per month. April 2013 saw a spark of violence after the Hawijah confrontation, which is very close to Salahudeen. At the same time, the group increased its confrontational operations, reaching a record of almost 50 per month. During the Ramadan month, there was a decrease in the number of operations from 175 to 120. We can assume that like for Baghdad, the number of operations decreased because many cells were rested for the preparation and execution of the twin attacks on Abu Ghraib and Taji Prison situated in northern Baghdad. The decrease of activity of June/July 2013 coincided with the new security plan of the ISF in the governorate, more precisely in the Sinia area in the region of Baiji and Tikrit. Conscious of the lack of human intelligence and preparedness of its forces, Salahudeen police called for the recruitment of a thousand additional forces<sup>436</sup>. The head of the police announced the arrest of 77 people on terrorism charges for the diffusion of 4 VBIEDs. In August 2013, the national campaign to “revenge the martyrs” was also conducted in Salahudeen and resulted in the arrest by the police of 42 suspects.<sup>437</sup> The Wali of the organisation in Salahudeen was reportedly arrested by the Kurdish Special Forces (Asaysh) during the same period in the south of Tikrit. In September 2013,

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<sup>434</sup> “The weakness of the intelligence effort and the declaration of some politicians are behind the deterioration of the security and Al Qaeda could win”, Al Mada Press, 28/09/2013, <https://goo.gl/WiuLnc>

<sup>435</sup> “Salahudeen Council : “ the transfer of the security affairs to the governorates decreased the level of violence by 80% and the coming elections will be ethnic and sectarian””, Al Mada Press, 6/10/2013, <https://goo.gl/f9dQ4c>

<sup>436</sup>“Salahudeen police elaborates a new Security plan to tackle security issues”, Al Mada Press, 3/06/2013, <https://goo.gl/1UD4o9>

<sup>437</sup>“The Iraqi Army starts a large operation in three provinces resulting in the arrest of 7 people”, Al Mada Press, 28/07/2013, <https://goo.gl/tQ1KFu>

the police announced a new anti-terrorist campaign and the arrest of 39 persons<sup>438</sup>. However, in Northern Baghdad an important complex operation took place with the simultaneous attack<sup>439</sup> against the police HQ in Taji with a VBIED detonation and an intrusion team.

During the last six months of 2013, the degradation of the security situation in Salahudeen was such that the governor called Baghdad to launch a military operation comparable to the one in Anbar.<sup>440</sup> Unlike in Anbar and Nineveh, most of the anti-terrorist operations in Salahudeen were led by the police rather than the military. Five months before, as a proof of the worsening of the security situation in the province, “for security reasons” the government decided to move the aircraft stationed at the military airport of Tikrit to “Imam Ali” airbase situated in Di Kar in the more stable southern part of the country<sup>441</sup>. This situation was aggravated with the deployment of the SWAT anti-terrorist division from Salahudeen to Anbar in late 2013, which further expanded the security vacuum in the governorate.

### **Confrontational operations**

We can observe in the last six months of 2013, two peaks of confrontational operation in April 2013 and January / February 2014. The April 2013 peak coincided with the bloody Hawijah confrontation between the army and protestors. This sparked a wave of violence in the governorate, where tribal armed groups confronted the security forces. Suleiman Pek fell into the hands of tribal groups affiliated with the protestors, but the city was retaken by security forces after tribal mediation. We can interpret IS’ announcement of a peak of

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<sup>438</sup> “Arrest of 37 suspects in a security operation in Salahudeen”, Al Mada Press, 7/09/2013, <https://goo.gl/LZfmyZ>

<sup>439</sup> “Armed men attack a police station in Taji and kills 27 people in the preliminary tolls”, Al Mada Press, 6/06/2013, <https://goo.gl/rpffkv>

<sup>440</sup> “Salahudeen waits for a military operation like in Anbar and calls for an amnesty for the Baathist not involved in killing Iraqis”, Al Mada Press, 26/12/2013, <https://goo.gl/5pXur5>

<sup>441</sup> “Baghdad decides to move for security reasons training airplanes from Tikrit airbase to Imam Ali airbase”, Al Mada Press, 23/08/2013, <https://goo.gl/ErUzrC>

confrontational operations concomitant to the spark of violence because it took advantage of the opportunity the confrontation between the ISF and the tribes was providing. In addition, it can be interpreted as a way for the group by surging its attacks to show its capabilities and demonstrate its status of the shield of the Sunni. In the aftermath of attacks led by Shia militias on a Sunni mosque in Diyala, we observe a similar peak of confrontational operations. During the following month, the group's confrontational operations per month were multiplied by 5, from 6 per month before April 2013 to 30 per month until April 2014. As a major operation, we can cite the attacks of five inghimassis against a highly guarded target such as the HQ of the Special Forces in the north of Tikrit<sup>442</sup>. The attackers did not succeed in entering the building; one was killed, and four activated their explosive vests killing four soldiers. A month later, the same modus operandi was used with four suicide bombers this time supported by a VBIED, which targeted the entrance of the explosive department in Tikrit and caused the killing and wounding of 10 soldiers<sup>443</sup>. In Taji, an S-VEST operation targeted a Sahawat gathering<sup>444</sup> while 2 S-VEST operations were conducted in Samarra against an army checkpoint and near the highly symbolic Imam Askari shrine<sup>445</sup>. Another complex operation was carried out by inghimassi fighters against the municipal council of Samarra in March 2014<sup>446</sup>. A VBIED was detonated before three fighters stormed the building and took hostage dozens of citizens waiting to take their voter cards. Finally, in November 2013, a checkpoint of the ISF was

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<sup>442</sup>“Five suicide bombers attack the siege of the Quick reaction force Northern Tikrit”, Al Mada Press, 1/09/2013, <https://goo.gl/zshbQK>

<sup>443</sup> “Increase of the Death toll after the attempt of storming of the explosives department building South of Tikrit”, Al Mada Press, 1/10/2013, <https://goo.gl/5ZJweg>

<sup>444</sup> “Increase of the Death toll after the suicide bombing in Taji to 40 killed and injured”, Al Mada Press, 4/02/2013, <https://goo.gl/xkqu1d>

<sup>445</sup> “Final death toll for the twin suicide bombings in Central Samara reaches 7”, Al Mada Press 13/10/2013, <https://goo.gl/gRHxGC>

<sup>446</sup> “Three suicide bombers activate their belts in front of Samara Municipal council building and report of a hostage situation there”, Al Mada Press, 4/03/2013, <https://goo.gl/fEqbFK>

targeted by two SVEST operations in Tarmiyah, killing and wounding 61 soldiers<sup>447</sup>.

In parallel to this surge of confrontational attacks across the region, the group started to try to establish its control over urban areas in Salahudeen. Reports emerged in November of 2013 about the storming of some territories near Suleiman Pek (90km east of Tikrit).<sup>448</sup> Three neighbourhoods in the western part of the city were said to be controlled by IS. As a result, more than 5000 inhabitants had to leave the city, and 40 % of the city was destroyed. While regaining control of parts of the city, the ISF claimed to have killed and arrested 100 fighters and destroyed ten terrorist camps in the governorate.<sup>449</sup>

In conclusion, we can observe that IS' trend line for its operations claimed in SNB was exponential; in two years it was almost multiplied by 9. The group increased its military capacity and activity in the region following some events such as the spark of the protest movement or the attacks on prisons or the Hawijah clashes.

Regarding the variation of confrontational operation, the turning point in the number of operations claimed started in September of 2013. Before that month, the average number of confrontational operations claimed was around ten operations per month, with the impacting exception of April 2013 coinciding with the Hawijah clashes, when 44 confrontational operations were claimed in SNB. During the following eight months after September 2013, the average number of operations claimed was 35. During this period, the group claimed the same number of operations as during the 22 preceding months. This shows an increase in capacity and confidence to confront the ISF and their allies in the governorate. Once the confrontational operation variation deviated by three standard deviations from the mean; this happened in January 2014 and was exceptional.

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<sup>447</sup> "Death toll for the twin suicide attacks in Northern Baghdad reach 61", Al Mada Press, 7/11/2013, <https://goo.gl/CNu5H8>

<sup>448</sup> "Source : "ISIS fighters have positioned themselves in Suleiman Pek and the army is ready for a coming confrontation", Al Mada Press, 30/12/2013, <https://goo.gl/rbAVXu>

<sup>449</sup> "MoI announces the arrest of 80 people and the destroying of 10 ISIS camps in Salahudeen during the month of February", Al Mada Press, 5/03/2014, <https://goo.gl/Q861iz>



It confirmed the increase in the capacity of the group in the governorate and the effort of the group at the nationwide level to confront the Iraqi Army at the same moment that it entered Fallujah and parts of Ramadi.

## **7-Findings and Conclusion**

Regarding the first hypothesis of the study, there is confirmation from IS' claims that in its tactics it mostly avoided confrontation in the two years preceding its urban assaults in Iraq. As with Lawrence's Arab rebellion or Fabien strategy, the majority of IS' operations orchestrated against its foes were applied through a modus operandi whose primal nature was to attack while avoiding confrontation with the target: IEDs, VBIEDS, indirect fire, HBIEDs and targeted assassinations were the most preferred types of operations. This way of fighting has shaped different strategies the group has undertaken in the provinces where it operated. For its guerrilla strategy, it has taken profit from the environment (desert of Anbar, urban areas of Nineveh or highly dense vegetation of Diyala) to conduct hit and run tactics and undiscovered operations. In other provinces following a punishment strategy, it has also deliberately targeted Shia civilians with the massive use of VBIEDs in Baghdad, Diyala and Salahudeen. The second finding of this investigation is that each province had its operational rhythm and developed its tactical patterns for different strategic objectives. We can also observe that its military performances and type of operations follow the context where they operate. From the figure it provided, the group has been reactive to the political turmoil in Iraq and the security vacuum it generated in some areas from mid-2012.

Nineveh was the most active region; it developed a classic guerrilla strategy of hold and control when the number of operations expanded in time without any pause. Anbar and SNB, being part of the so-called "triangle of death" during the US occupation, shared an exponential growth in their operational trend. Until late 2013, both provinces had a sinusoidal evolution in their activities, showing the need for IS' cells to have a rest period. Nevertheless, they developed the same ability to surge in their number of operations and raise their capacity to launch confrontational operations. The variation of the operations claimed in these three

provinces followed an exponential trend line. The tactical pattern they shared shows how certain these provinces were in confronting their enemies; this confidence confirmed later in the territorial gains IS was able to claim. In these three provinces, the use of IEDs and HBIEDs was widespread, and the accuracy of targeted assassinations demonstrated an extended level of human intelligence and mastering of the terrain. The use of VBIEDs across these provinces was limited while SVBIEDs were understood as a *modus operandi* for military purposes similar to artillery in conventional warfare.

The study's result confirms that Diyala Province was under-resourced compared to the others. It is said to have been the laboratory of the Iraqi state because of its sectarian and ethnical composure. For IS' tactics, it also served as a laboratory. It was the only province where the group developed the three tactical patterns for three possible strategies in Iraq: urban terrorism against minorities, guerrilla operations taking advantage of the dense vegetation to hide and urban assault for territorial control with its failed assault on Buhriz. The trend line of the group's variation of claimed operations was linear, confirming empowerment of the group in the province, with a steady increase of operations following the trimester cycle. Finally, Baghdad Province's tactical manoeuvres focused on SVEST operations and VBIEDs for a classic tactic of urban terrorism and punishment strategy. Because of the sectarian composition of the city, it could rely on the Sunni pockets there and generally use the neighbouring provinces (Baghdad belt, South, and Diyala) as a starting point to launch terrorist attacks. Confrontational operations were shallow, except for the complex and "extraordinary" attack on the Abu Ghraib Prison, which involved dozens of units and the resources of neighbouring provinces. The attack variation trend line was polynomic in a sense it followed a constant variation without a significant apparent trend line while the figures at the end of 2011 do not differ much from those in 2014. The fact that no data for the confrontational operations was dispersed three standard deviations from the average shows that unlike in other provinces, in Diyala the group never had the capacity to surge in the number of confrontational operations, which could have given the group the ability to seriously pose a threat in terms of disputing territory with its enemy.

IS' figures in terms of operation claimed (not the death toll, which is generally inflated or when a failed operation may be pictured as successful) were in phase with the reality and the state of power of the group during the period of the study. The evolution of the number of claimed operations per month found an echo with the political and security events occurring at the same time. The spillover of the Syrian war and the strengthening of IS' Syrian wing, the deterioration of security in the aftermath of the protests in January, clashes of April 2013 in Hawijah, the political mess between Sunni local authorities and the Sahawat and the government in Baghdad have impacted IS' number of operations claimed in Nineveh, Diyala, Anbar and SNB. At the same time, security operations and campaigns of the ISF against the group by coinciding with a fall of activity seemed to have had a decreasing effect on the number of operations claimed by the group.

Confrontational operations, which are more spectacular, making headlines and affecting the collective consciousness, generally increased on special occasions. They were designed to send a message for the Ramadan month for its constituency, the Moharam month against the Shia community, for the inauguration of military campaigns or as a response to tragic events (Hawijah and Saadia attacks). In some provinces, we can observe the validity of the so-called "Ramadan peak of operation" but just for confrontational operations (SVBIED, incursions, S-VESTS). Jihadi literature has envisioned Ramadan as a month of battle and sacrifice; a spike of confrontational operations might be interpreted as a way for the group to show and prove its zeal and commitment to religion. The studied sample indicates that all the provinces underwent a peak of direct confrontational operations for July 2012 and 2013 except for Anbar and SNB, which announced a decline in these types of operation for July 2013. We may assume that resources for such operations were relocated between neighbouring provinces in order to grant the success of complex attacks such as the Abu Ghraib assault in Baghdad, which was an IS' catalyst operation in Iraq for 2013. It has been stressed that the establishment of checkpoints was an indicator for a rise of capacity before the seizing of territory. In Diyala, the group established more checkpoints than in any other province (seven in 2013). In reality, this parameter does not say much about the ability to launch urban assaults but rather

its control of rural areas. For the case of Diyala, the establishment of checkpoints did not serve as a prelude to a successful shift of strategy from guerrilla to territorial control. The Diyala Province never succeeded in launching more than 20 confrontational operations per month even during the Buhriz assault on March 2013. The other provinces where IS was later able to seize urban areas permanently (SNB, Anbar and Nineveh) reached at least the operational level of sustaining 50 confrontational operations per month. Finally, after analysing the variation in operations claimed by the group in the months before its urban assaults we cannot talk about a “June” or “January” surprise for the event in Mosul and Anbar. Control of these territories was preceded by a steady rise of non-confrontational operations during the two years preceding the events. The sharp increase of confrontational operations just before the conquests of the cities could have increased the attention of the authorities. The existence of data dispersed from the average number of operations claimed by three times the standard deviation contributed to highlighting the exceptionality of the moment the group enjoyed at that time. The existence of these exceptional abnormal results could have focused attention perhaps not on IS’ real capacity (it depends on the veracity of its claims), but at least it sheds light on the high level of confidence it had in confronting ISF and its aspiration to establish control over territories. The group also undertook small-scale urban assaults in these provinces in order to control to test the reaction of ISF and prepare for operations that were more important.

Moreover, the fact that IS’ exceptional confrontational figures in Nineveh and SNB occurred in January 2014 could lead us to make two assumptions. First, that in January the group tried to take other cities than Anbar, like Shura and Tuz Khurmato in January 2014. Secondly, that the shift from guerrilla to open confrontation in Nineveh and Salahudeen happened earlier than the June offensive, which had been prepared six months before by the dramatic surge of confrontational operations in January. Instead of a sudden unexpected event, the fall of the city would be the result of a six-month campaign of confrontational operations that led to the fall of the city. If IS figures were to be verified and right Mosul’s takeover would be the outcome of a campaign that had started months before the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2014 events.

Provinces	Nineveh	Diyala	Baghdad	Anbar	SNB
Most operations	IEDs Assassinations storming of fixed targets Grenades	HBIEDs IEDs Assassinations	VBIEDs SVESTs	IEDs assassinations	IEDs Assassinations, indirect fire, targeted attacks,
Targets	ISF Government collaborators	ISF Shia militias Shia population, Sahawat Government collaborators	ISF Shia population Government collaborators	ISF Sahawat Government collaborators	ISF Sahawat Shia population Government collaborators
Ratio Total / confrontational operations	4 : 1	8 : 1	12:1	6: 1	7 :1
Operational pace	Semester	Trimester	No pattern	2012 month 2013 semester	Trimester 2012 Semester 2013
Trend line for total operations	Exponential	Positive linear	No observable trend line	Exponential	Exponential
Trend line for confrontational operations	Exponential	No trend line	No trend line	Exponential	Linear
Ramadan peak of operations	Yes	No	Yes	No	No

*Table 9 Summary Table giving an overview of the observation of the variation of operations claimed by IS in 5 provinces from November 2011 to April 2014*

# VII - Analysis of IS' 2012/2013 prison break campaign and 2014-2015 urban offensives from a strategic military perspective.

## 1- IS' prison break strategy

### **IS' VBIED strategy from dispersion to concentration**

During July of 2012, corresponding with the holy month of Ramadan, the organisation launched a year-long operation, they named the "Breaking the Walls" campaign. This campaign is considered to have prepared the terrain for ISI's operational objectives to retake territory and to establish governance in parts of Iraq and Syria. It consisted of a series of hundreds of VBIED attacks in total and eight prison breaks across the country. According to IS' figures, around 900 VBIEDs and 100 SVBIEDs were claimed across the country in 2012 and 2013. As stated by Jessica Lewis, in analysing the campaign, "these attacks required extensive planning and logistical structure and followed a well-conceived strategy"<sup>450</sup>. Her contribution was to seek to interpret VBIED wave patterns in order to assess ISI's organisational evolution. She argues that VBIED waves during that campaign were "not an environmental condition, nor a disorganised and frenzied attack phenomenon, but a highly organised and meticulously planned military operation with forensic signatures that can be tracked".<sup>451</sup> Lewis

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<sup>450</sup> Jessica D Stern, "Al Qaeda in Iraq is resurgent", Middle East Security Report 14, September 2013, p8, [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf),

<sup>451</sup> *ibid* p20

pointed to four different phases for the one-year campaign.<sup>452</sup> These phases were not announced but instead assessed by her observing qualitative and quantitative differences in attack patterns over time. From a geographical angle, most of the attacks concentrated on zones the group did not control or where they did not have consistent support bases. Support zones of the group such in Anbar, Diyala, Nineveh and Salahudeen were less targeted than in the South, Baghdad and its belt and Kirkuk Province. Particularly in Baghdad and Kirkuk, the VBIED campaign followed a 2006-2007 pattern of targeting civilians in crowded areas in order to ignite sectarian tensions. In contrast to its previous campaign, this time VBIEDs were weaponised massively in waves of synchronised attacks throughout the country.

For the non-state actors, which lack airpower, VBIEDs can be considered as weapons for strategic penetration associated with the poor man's air force. Liddell Hart saw how the objective of dislocation could be achieved for regular forces with air power. He wrote that "aircraft enable us to jump over the army, which shields the enemy government, industry and people and to strike direct at the opposing will and policy"<sup>453</sup>. He believed that the nerve centre of a modern state was particularly vulnerable to air attack<sup>454</sup>. Additionally, he claimed that "an air force is a super-guerrilla instrument"<sup>455</sup> to emphasise its non-confrontational dimension. IS lacks air power; the only weapon in its hands to target the nerve centre on its enemy while avoiding confrontation is the VBIED. IS' cells have the ability to detonate it behind enemy lines particularly in Baghdad, to inflict high maximum damages, and target its nerve centres as well as its civilian infrastructures. This parallel with the air force regarding the targeting of civilians was emphasised by Ivan Arreguin-Toft with the notion of "barbarism"<sup>456</sup> of

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid p12

<sup>453</sup> Basil H. Liddell Hart, *On the Future of War*, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.,1972, p37

<sup>454</sup> Ibid p 40–41.

<sup>455</sup> Liddle Hart, *The Revolution in Warfare*, London, 1946, p. 25

<sup>456</sup> Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars. A theory of asymmetric conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

conventional and non-conventional forces when he compares deliberate attacks against civilians by non-state actors to strategic bombardments of states against civilian targets.



**Map showing prisons attacked by IS in Iraq since the start of the “Breaking the Walls” campaign in August 2012**

### **Prison breaks strategy: adaptability and flexibility**

Although the campaign was announced in July 2012, prison breaks involving IS’ inmates around the country had started several months before. No assaults were carried out but prison breaks succeeded in different and adaptive ways. In April 2011, 30 inmates succeeded in escaping from the Ghazlani and Ahdath prisons in Mosul.<sup>457</sup> Additionally, in September 2011, 35 inmates accused

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<sup>457</sup>“Escape of 35 prisoners from Tasfirat prison in Mosul”, Al Sumariyah, 1/11/2011, <https://www.alsumaria.tv/mobile/news/45629/iraq-news>



of terrorism successfully escaped after digging a tunnel from a provisional prison in Mosul. In January 2012, in Dohuk, 11 inmates succeeded in digging a tunnel of 80m and escaped from the Zorkah prison.<sup>458</sup> The Kirkuk prison break occurred on 23<sup>th</sup> of February 2012. Inmates poisoned dates served to the guards and escaped from the air-conditioning system of the prison. In January 2011, at the Basra intelligence unit related to the Iraqi Army, 12 inmates from IS succeeded in escaping. The Taji prison (25 km north of Baghdad) was attacked for the first time by an SVBIED detonated at the main gate, killing 11 Iraqi soldiers. However, the attack was not designed to provoke a prison break, but instead it targeted a gathering of Iraqi military vehicles at the entrance of the main gate<sup>459</sup>.

The announcement of the “Breaking the Walls” campaign marked the start of a new phase using complex armed assaults against prisons coupled with VBIED waves across the country. While VBIED waves were first dispersed, the prison assaults were concentrated in Baghdad. These assaults were complex and synchronised attacks involving confrontational and non-confrontational operations: VBIEDS or SVBIEDs, assault teams of inghimassi fighters, indirect fire teams with mortars and support teams planting IEDs and ambushing the routes leading to the prisons. From July 2012 to July 2013, prison break operations evolved in their complexity, timing, intelligence planning and level of coordination between attackers and inmates inside the prisons.

### **The First Wave in Baghdad of August 2012**

The first prison break attempt after the announcement of the campaign occurred on 19<sup>th</sup> July 2012. Sixteen inmates on death row tried to escape from a

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<sup>458</sup>“Escape of 11 inmates from Kirkuk Prison”, Aljazeera, 23/03/2012 <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2012/3/23/%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-19-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%88%D9%83>

<sup>459</sup>“11 persons dead after the attack on a prison in Iraq”, Al Jazeera, 28/11/2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2012/9/28/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AA>

high-security prison in Khadimiyah in Baghdad.<sup>460</sup> The first assault occurred on 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 2012 against the Baghdad Counterterrorism Directorate, where 400 inmates were detained. Two VBIEDs exploded at the entrance of the building killing around 20 people<sup>461</sup>. Right after, six inghimassi fighters in police uniform wearing suicide vests stormed the building; three of them were killed at the entrance while the others went to the second floor to free the inmates. The Golden Division unit thwarted the attack, and the remaining attackers were killed after five hours of significant fighting. The following day, the prison of Taji was attacked for the first time. The assault failed despite the attackers succeeded in destroying the main gate, which was under construction. Three attackers were killed; the rest were arrested while three out of four VBIEDs deployed were defused. At the same time, an ISF patrol was ambushed in Taji<sup>462</sup>. During the same period on August 5<sup>th</sup>, at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, inmates tried to tunnel out of prison but failed in their enterprise<sup>463</sup>. Inside their cells, they dug a 17m tunnel in order to escape. The prison was already under high surveillance after the interception of intelligence reports on August 2<sup>nd</sup> about the imminence of an attack. Later on March 13<sup>th</sup> 2013, the authorities announced the thwarting of another tentative escape from the prison, where the inmates had planned to set the prison on fire<sup>464</sup>.

The first VBIED waves on July 23, 2012, and September 9, 2012, involved 30 and 21 VBIEDs for the two days. The geography of these attacks was widespread, stretching from Basra in the south to Mosul in the north while the last

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<sup>460</sup> "Thwarting of prison Break of 16 inmates in Baghdad", Al Sumariyah, 19/07/2012 <https://goo.gl/52iGZC>

<sup>461</sup> "After the operation of counter terrorism armed men tried to storm the prison of Taji", Al Mada Press, 2/08/2012, <https://goo.gl/Gkkjqqa>

<sup>462</sup> "Killing of 6 policemen in an armed assault and the tentative to break a prison northern Baghdad", AFP, 1/08/2012, <http://elaph.com/Web/news/2012/8/752228.html>

<sup>463</sup> Raheem Salman, "Al Qaeda claims Iraq attacks, Baghdad anti-terrorism HQ assault", Reuters, 13/08/2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-violence/al-qaeda-claims-iraq-attacks-baghdad-anti-terrorism-hq-assault-idUSBRE87C0OE20120813>

<sup>464</sup> "Security Sources reveal the killing of more than 150 inmates during the Taji Events", Al Mada Press, 23/07/2013, <http://turkmentribune.com/Article5/A6472.htm>

focused on Baghdad, considered as the centre of the enemy.<sup>465</sup> For both cases, it shows how the strategy of the operations' masterminds was to strike as many targets as possible and not concentrate on specific points yet. Most of the VBIEDs were detonated across northern Iraq in Mosul, Kirkuk, Diyala, Salahudeen and Anbar. In comparison, only four of the VBIEDs were detonated in Baghdad, with one north in Tarmiyah. This first wave of attacks saw a dispersion of the VBIED operations across Iraq and concentration of the prison break assaults inside Baghdad. These early assaults on prisons did not succeed in breaking their defences and freeing inmates, but they sent the message that ISI was willing to orchestrate prison breaks and able to launch attacks on very fortified targets in the heart of the capital.

### **The Second Wave: Tikrit / Diyala late September and October 2012**

The second wave of prison attacks took place in Salahudeen and Diyala. First, the Hib Hib police directorate in Diyala (70 km North Baghdad) was attacked on 20<sup>th</sup> September by three suicide bombers, a VBIED and indirect fire<sup>466</sup>. The attackers tried to storm the building and free ten important leaders of the group. The attack was thwarted likely because the VBIED detonated close to the main gate did not cause any damage to the facility. This first assault on a prison outside Baghdad failed while there were no indications of possible coordination between attackers and the inmates.

The second attack against the Tikrit Tasfirat prison occurred a week later on September 27, 2012, at dawn against a target situated in the centre of the city. *Tasfirat* refers to a temporary jailhouse for inmates accused of terrorism and awaiting trial and for convicts to be transferred to prisons. The attack was preceded on September 19<sup>th</sup> by an attempted escape from Tikrit Central prison

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<sup>465</sup> Jessica D Lewis, "Al Qaeda in Iraq is resurgent", Middle East Security Report 14 , September 2013, [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf)

<sup>466</sup>"The Dajla operation command thwarts the escape of 10 leader of Al Qaeda from Hib Hib prison", Burath News, 20/09/2012, <http://burathanews.com/arabic/news/170255>

thwarted by intelligence services, without details<sup>467</sup>. There is a possibility that this attempted escape was to be launched at the same time as the attack on Tasfirat prison, which was less guarded than the city's Central Prison.

In the video entitled *Saleel Sawareem 3*<sup>468</sup>, the IS media production wing Al Furqan revealed some details about the prison break. Five minutes in, a fugitive narrates what occurred inside the prison. According to him, inmates were in coordination with attackers and were divided into seven groups of 56 inmates, ready to attack the guards. The fugitive revealed that an attack from outside was the only possible *modus operandi* to free the prisoners after their failure to dig a tunnel a few months before. This episode was confirmed by the Iraqi press, which revealed that in January 2012, an attempted escape with a tunnel was thwarted by the authorities<sup>469</sup>. According to the group, silenced weapons, hand grenades, and explosive belts were smuggled into the prison to the inmates. The Minister of Justice confirmed that "collusion between some guards and inmates occurred in the Tasfirat prison"<sup>470</sup>. The prison break was coordinated from inside and outside the prison, which was the first time this had occurred. An SVBIED was detonated at the entrance of the prison while the roads leading to it were cut off. The whole prison fell into the hands of the inmates and the attackers. The attackers wore police uniforms and used cars similar to those driven by police to cross the checkpoints in the city<sup>471</sup>. From the 303 inmates at the prison, 116 escaped including 47 inmates awaiting their execution; 12 guards and police

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<sup>467</sup>"Thwarting of an attempt escape from the Tikrit Prison", Al Sumariya, 19/09/2012, <https://goo.gl/M3kNPv>

<sup>468</sup> Lit "The Clanking of the Swords", al-Furqān Media presents a new video message from the Islamic State of Iraq: "Clanging of the Swords, available on the following link <https://jihadology.net/2012/08/16/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-clanging-of-the-swords-part-2%E2%80%B3/>

<sup>469</sup>"Killing and wounding of 63 people during an assault on Tikrit Tasfirat Prison", Al Sumariya, 28/09/2012, <https://goo.gl/aWxv69>

<sup>470</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Iraqi Interior Ministry says Tikrit prison break was an inside job", 29 September 2012, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5073cc5ac.html>

<sup>471</sup> Mohammed Lazim, "Bombs, gunfire in deadly prison outbreak in Iraq", CNN, October 1, 2012, <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/27/world/meast/iraq-prison-break/index.html>

officers, as well as five inmates, were killed. Prison files were destroyed during the prison break to conceal the identity of the fugitives. During the attack, two VBIEDs were parked in Tikrit downtown but were defused by security forces. Their deployment was likely a diversion manoeuvre in order to accentuate the dispersion of the ISF in the city Iraqi forces announced the arrest of 40 escaped inmates in the following days of the prison break. Three days after the jailbreak, a new wave of 13 VBIEDs hit the country, the majority of which targeted Baghdad and Taji, with additional attacks in Baqubah, Kut, Fallujah, Hit and Mosul<sup>472</sup>.

The campaign passed through a rest period of several months with no prison breaks attempted, and few VBIEDs detonated. As a result, from November 2012 to February 2013, IS' VBIED waves focused their attacks upon civilian and government targets along the green line separating Iraqi Kurdistan from the rest of Iraq<sup>473</sup>. During this operational pause, most of the effort was oriented on Kirkuk with the deliberate strategy to exploit a critical vulnerability of the Iraqi Government. This time range permitted the incorporation to IS ranks of the Tikrit Tasfirat prison fugitives and was part of the defensive requirement to protect against ISF's security measures as a consequence of the prison break.

## **2-The July 2013 Abu Ghraib Prison Break**

From February to June 2013, ISIS focused its nationwide VBIED campaign on the capital Baghdad with large VBIED waves striking at a steady tempo of 30-day intervals<sup>474</sup>. After May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the VBIED campaign quadrupled in frequency and remained focused upon Shia targets in Baghdad. Half of the VBIED waves documented in Jessica Lewis' study occurred during this last quarter of the campaign. At the end of the campaign, Baghdad, considered as

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<sup>472</sup> Jessica D Stern, "Al Qaeda in Iraq is resurgent", Middle East Security Report 14, September 2013, [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf)

<sup>473</sup> Ibid

<sup>474</sup> Ibid

the nerve centre of the Iraqi state, had the highest number of VBIEDs. This methodology of attacking the periphery before focusing on the centre mirrors Hart's advice to first concentrate on the periphery before attacking the enemy's centre.

The last phase culminated with the attack on the Abu Ghraib and Taji prisons on 21, July 2013. The prison assaults and the VBIED waves in Baghdad synchronised the non-confrontational operation of VBIED waves and confrontational assaults on prisons. At the time of the attack, around 70 000 members of the security forces were present in Baghdad while 3000 were positioned in Abu Ghraib prison and its vicinity<sup>475</sup>. In the statement taking credit for the attack, the group presented the details of the operation, named "*Qahr Al Tawagheet*", the "Destruction of the Idols". The attack was planned by Abu Muhannad Al Suweidawi, a former air force intelligence unit officer in the Iraqi Baathist Army. He was part of the same unity than Hajji Bakr and would lead the IS during the Anbar offensive 2014.

In preparation for the attack, the roads between Baghdad-Mosul and Baghdad-Abu Ghraib were cut while the linking of both prisons was secured with the elimination of army checkpoints leading to them<sup>476</sup>. The Al Taji prison is entrenched inside a heavily fortified military camp in Al Taji situated 25 km north of Baghdad. Back in January 2013, 12 inmates from the group escaped by night, but the modus operandi of their prison break was not disclosed by the press<sup>477</sup>. The method of escape was "soft" and did not require an assault from the outside. At the beginning of the attack, the eighth division and Al Taji military base were pounded by Grad missiles. Three SVBIEDs were detonated targeting the principal entrance, the south entrance and the second entrance. At the same time, prisoners started a rebellion by igniting a fire. They managed to escape from

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<sup>475</sup>"The prisons of Iraq under the hand of AL Qaeda", DW Arab, 26/07/2013, <https://goo.gl/v2ayHw>

<sup>476</sup> "The Al Qaeda organization in Iraq claims its responsibility for the attack on the Prisons", France 24, 23/07/2013, <https://goo.gl/A4o3uj>

<sup>477</sup> "Escape of 12 prisoners from Taji prison", Sumariyah, 11/01/2013, <https://goo.gl/BF2vCK>

their cells, killing some guards but could not escape from the prison after being fired upon by the remaining guards, causing the death of 150 prisoners.

Nevertheless, 50 inmates managed to escape according to security sources. Despite the use of SVBIEDs, the perimeter of the prison was not breached and prisoners did not receive any further help from outsiders. Indeed, the prison of Taji, situated inside a military heavily fortified garrison, was considered almost impossible to breach for IS' forces. It is likely that the attack was not meant to succeed but was orchestrated as a diversion in order to disperse and disorientate the enemy's forces and push ISF stationed in Baghdad into a dilemma.

Unlike Taji prison, the Abu Ghraib prison was guarded not by the Army but rather by the police, which had the responsibility to guard the perimeter outside the prison. Around 340 members of the Federal Police under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior were guarding the towers, the main entrance and the vicinity. The guards inside the prison were not armed while Army patrols were conducted as a routine on a daily basis before the sunset.<sup>478</sup> Curiously, it was reported<sup>479</sup> that the day of the attack, the 17<sup>th</sup> division was not deployed for its routine patrol while the only one deployed was the fifth division. The group very likely had previous knowledge that on that day of the attack, the prison was less guarded than usual.

Simultaneously with the Taji prison attack, at 9 pm the perimeter of Abu Ghraib prison, situated west of Baghdad, was first bombed by a hundred of rockets and RPGs. It was breached from its main entrance and the exterior walls by three SVBIEDs and finally assaulted by nine inghimassi fighters wearing suicide vests, small arms and mortars. A riot started from inside the prison after the power was cut off. The rescue teams coming from Baghdad were ambushed and slowed for more than three hours, offering enough time for the fugitives to escape<sup>480</sup>. The

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<sup>478</sup> Malak Ahmad, "How the inmates of Taji and Abu Ghraib escaped", Raise your voice , Baghdad, 12 February 2016, <https://goo.gl/Byv7uG>

<sup>479</sup> Ibid

<sup>480</sup> Ibid

Abu Ghraib prison was overrun, and the attackers were able to occupy the facility. Like in Tikrit, inmates were armed and managed to smuggle light weapons and grenades inside the prison. ISF returned fire into the morning, killing an unknown number of IS' fighters and 71 prisoners while 41 security members were reported killed. Despite their efforts and the security measures taken in Baghdad, between 600 and 1000 prisoners escaped from Abu Ghraib that night.

The Abu Ghraib prison was the less fortified prison attacked that night and had topographic attributes more prone to see the attack succeed. The operation saw a massive use of 12 SVBIEDs in order to breach the prison's walls and gates. This effort was accompanied with coordination from inmates inside the prison and the support of IED and mortar cells. The synchronicity of both operations demonstrated a high level of planning for a complex, specialised and risky operation. Abu Ghraib prison break was a fully-fledged military operation requiring intelligence gathering, pre-planning and a well-studied escape plan with all the required logistical resources.

### **Consequences of the prison break**

Because of its enormous impact, this operation concluded the "Breaking the Walls" campaign and had important benefits for the group. First, it provided an essential influx of human resources by freeing fighters and high-level cadres of the first and second generation of jihadists in Iraq. With at least 500 fighters freed, this infusion of manpower was five times greater than the one produced after the Tikrit prison break. The press <sup>481</sup>indicated that multiple cars were waiting for the inmates at a one-kilometre distance from the prison before dispersing in many areas such as Samarra, Al Amiriyah (west of Baghdad), Fallujah and Ramadi. Some fugitives were also transferred to Syria for operational deployment. According to the local press,<sup>482</sup> leaders of the group in prison before their escape were already planning the takeover of Iraqi cities in 2014. It is said

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<sup>481</sup> ibid

<sup>482</sup>"Daesh planned to take over the cities from inside the prisons", Al Araby newspaper, 8/8/2017  
URL: <https://goo.gl/MYkpy1>



that the future governor of Wilayat Jazira and the charismatic ground leader Abu Waheeb from Anbar were among the fugitives. Other reports <sup>483</sup> which have not been confirmed went even further speculating that the architect of the Mosul assault in 2014, Al Bilawi, was freed. What was confirmed<sup>484</sup> by IS was the freeing of Abu Nabil al-Anbari, the future governor of Salahudeen, who led the attack on Samara in 2014 and was sent in 2015 to Libya to be the group's leader there. What was worrying for the Iraqi security forces is that it lost track of many IS members arrested by the US forces from 2007 to 2010.

For the group, it constituted a lesson learned after having failed twice to breach Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 and 2005<sup>485</sup>. On both these occasions, AQI faced the US forces and planned the operations as retaliatory raids in response to the torture perpetrated in the facility. The mentor of Zarqawi, Abu Anas Shami, died while leading the first attempt. A year later, poor intelligence gathering did not allow the attackers to breach the prison. Regardless of their failure, these operations held great symbolic and propaganda value for the group. This time IS succeeded in what its predecessors had tried, which was a source of prestige and confirmation of the group's military evolution towards a more professional army.

The operation generated a climate of suspicion among the security apparatus in Iraq and the political factions. The chief of the 17<sup>th</sup> division, Nasr Al Ghanam, whose division did not show up the day of the attack on Abu Ghraib Prison resigned. The Minister of Justice quickly presented internal documents of the prison distributed to the Federal Police showing that it had prior knowledge that an attack against the prison was imminent and that attackers had collaborators

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<sup>483</sup> "Mushreq Abbas, "Al-Qaeda Militants Raid Iraq's Abu Ghraib, Taji Prisons"", Al Monitor, July 25, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/iraq-al-qaeda-prison-raid-abu-ghraib.html>

<sup>484</sup> Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Eulogy to Abu Nabil al-Anbari: Islamic State leader in Libya", 6 January 2016, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/01/eulogy-to-abu-nabil-al-anbari-islamic-state>

<sup>485</sup> Walid Al Rawi, "the incursion on the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Rawi", Al Gardenia magazine, 31/07/2013, <https://algardenia.com/maqalat/5654-2013-07-31-07-01-17.html>

at the top level from inside the prison<sup>486</sup>. The security forces were said to have neglected important information that would have got their attention such as the fact that two days before the attack, militants had warned civilians in villages in the vicinity of the prison not to take the main road<sup>487</sup>. On the 8<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of June Prime Minister Al Maliki received memos from the Ministry of Justice warning about an incoming large-scale attack against prisons in Baghdad using car bombs<sup>488</sup>. Five other memos, one even 12 hours before the attack, warned the security forces about the imminence of an attack<sup>489</sup>. According to Iraqi journalist Al Habobi's article, the Iraqi Minister of the Interior also redacted a note before the attack, warning about "the gathering of Al Qaeda in Iraq terrorists and the likelihood of the targeting of prisons"<sup>490</sup>. This note suggests that the Iraqi intelligence services were able to breach the organisation's structure but without the expected result of thwarting such attacks. According to the Committee Defence of Security, "Al Qaeda in Iraq lured the intelligence services before the operation by spreading tones of information which were false and true, making it impossible for them to find the valid information"<sup>491</sup>.

Finally, this operation was also an advantage for the group, consolidating their popular support through spectacular attacks that raised their prestige. Many of the fugitives were Sunnis of the region whose families claimed they were

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<sup>486</sup> Ahmed Hashim Al Hobobi, "The raid of eliminating the Tawagheet the conclusion of the breaking the walls campaign", Kitabat, 1/09/2013, <https://goo.gl/hnhbHm>

<sup>487</sup> "Even Allouch was aware of the attack on Abu Ghraib two days before", Al Sumariyah, 24/07/2013, <https://goo.gl/Z2Ns8t>

<sup>488</sup> Malak Ahmad, "How the inmates of Taji and Abu Ghraib escaped", Raise your voice, Baghdad", 12 February 2016, <https://goo.gl/Byv7uG>

<sup>489</sup> "Documents : The intelligence services warned with 7 secret memos about the assault on Taji and Abu Ghraib Prisons", Al Maslaha, 28/07/2013, <https://goo.gl/oKhxky>

<sup>490</sup> Ahmed Hashim Al Hobobi, "The raid of eliminating the Tawagheet the conclusion of the breaking the walls campaign", Kitabat, 1/09/2013, <https://goo.gl/hnhbHm>

innocent. The ISF conducted security operations in 4800 houses north and west of Baghdad in response to the attack and detained 250 suspects, but none of them were fugitives<sup>492</sup>. These actions further alienated the ISF from the population, which considered it as a measure of collective punishment. At the same time, it negatively influenced the confidence of the Iraqi people towards their government and security forces, demonstrating the group's ability to breach the government's most secured areas. These elements participated in the public disaffection towards the government and the steady dislocation of ISF's psychological balance, which is the indispensable prelude to a decisive victory according to Liddle Hart's precepts.

To conclude this section, I present now the points of convergence and divergence of IS' strategy during its prison break attempts and the principles of LH's theory of the indirect approach.

### **1-Adjust your end to your means**

This guideline refers to the necessity of the group using its forces with limitation by taking into account the balance of power. Throughout the "Breaking the Walls" campaign, IS maintained the initiative in its offensives and held the surprise effect in successive phases divided by operational pauses. It affected the enemy's morale by launching regular waves of attacks, which culminated in eight prison escapes and more than 800 inmates liberated. The first prisons attacked were the less guarded targets such as the police station in Diyala (September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012 attack on the Hib Hib police directorate) or Tasfirat prisons but progressively, the group turned to target the most fortified prisons and highly symbolic prisons in Baghdad.

Strategic planners and VBIED cells seem to have been in coordination in order to advance the strategic objective of the campaign. Indeed, during the first assault on Baghdad prisons on August 5<sup>th</sup>, the VBIED wave was dispersed throughout Iraq. For the second assault on Baghdad's prisons, the VBIED waves and the

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<sup>492</sup> "Even Allouch was aware of the attack on Abu Ghraib 2 days before", Al Sumariyah, 24/07/2013, <https://goo.gl/Z2Ns8t>

attacks on prisons were concentrated on Baghdad. Comparing the two assaults on Baghdad prisons, the resources used were also very different. During the first assault in August 2012, no SVBIEDs were used, and attackers did not have the logistical support for carrying out a mass escape. The first assault had the characteristic of the classical inghimassi operations, storming a building with no escape plan while the second assault a year later in July 2013 was a full-fledged military operation with the use of 12 SVBIEDs and dozens of units. We can speculate that the first assault on August 12<sup>th</sup> 2012 was more a show of force at the heart of the capital to mark the inauguration of the campaign proclaimed by the leader of the group a few weeks before. A month later, the group attacked prisons in the Iraqi provinces of Diyala and Tikrit with storming assault groups and SVBIEDs. During this first phase, the real target for which more resources were allocated was the Tikrit Tasfirat prison. For the reasons presented above, I consider that IS leaders adhered to this principle.

## **2-Always keep your object in mind.**

This principle highlights the fact that the objective rather than the means is the most important in a military campaign. It refers to a flexibility of the mind in the selection of the means according to circumstances. For the case study, every prison assault saw first a “soft” prison break attempt using tunnels or deception to distract the guards: Abu Ghraib in August 2012, Tasfirat Prison in January 2012 and Taji Prison in January 2012. Only the Taji prison break succeeded. When this soft modus operandi failed, the group used assault teams to storm the prisons. Other prison breaks did not see a soft attempt before the violent one such as the assault on Baghdad anti-terrorist unit on August 5<sup>th</sup> and the assault of Hib Hib in September 2012. Both assaults failed, and there was no coordination with the inmates inside the prison. Afterwards, we can observe that the nature of the attacks went further into complexity with better coordination between attackers and inmates and the involvement of many military cells such as in Tikrit Tasfirat, Abu Ghraib and Taji. While for Tikrit and Abu Ghraib both assaults succeeded completely, in Taji it succeeded partially with only 50 inmates freed. For the reasons presented above, we can affirm that IS leaders adhered to this principle.

### **3 -Choose the line (or course) of least expectation.**

The purpose of this guideline is to achieve psychological surprise. As described by Jessica Lewis, the “Breaking the Walls” campaign, because of its wide geographical dispersion, seems to have been shaped by a coordinated leadership and a decentralised execution. This operational framework made it very difficult for ISF to foresee where the next attack would occur. Most of the VBIEDs detonated in Baghdad were manufactured outside the capital. Throughout 2012-2013, IS’ cells used a network of unofficial suburban roads in Baghdad’s belt without being spotted by the security forces. In the days following and before the attack on Abu Ghraib and the Tikrit Tasfirat prison, VBIED waves were orchestrated as a diversion for the attack. However, we shall note that Iraqi intelligence had prior knowledge of an imminent prison break attempt that would take place, but it did not know where or when. The attackers in the prison breaks sometimes used uniforms and vehicles of the police (Tikrit and Baghdad counterterrorism centre) to deceive the ISF, which emphasised the surprise effect of the operation. All the attacks on prisons occurred at night adding to the surprise effect and the impossibility for the guards to figure out what was happening. According to the testimony from a guard inside Abu Ghraib, they had to use their flashlight from their mobile phone during the clashes to see the attackers.<sup>493</sup> For the reasons presented above, I consider that IS leaders adhered to this principle.

### **4 -Exploit the line of least resistance.**

This principle is a corollary of the previous one by achieving physical surprise on the enemy. The “Breaking the Walls” campaign first phase concentrated on weak points in Iraq such as the Kurdish cities in the North and the Iraqi province of the South, Salahudeen, before turning to the centre. On 21<sup>st</sup> July 2013, the prison which was the focus of IS efforts, was the least fortified one, the Abu Ghraib prison. The day of the attack was not fortuitous; it took place when the 17<sup>th</sup> division did not patrol to secure its perimeter. During the three main complex assaults on prisons (Abu Ghraib, Taji and Tikrit), attackers came from

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<sup>493</sup> ibid

four fronts encircling the prison. Unfortunately, I did not find any report or information about the routes of the attackers and their projection site for the attacks on Tikrit, Abu Ghraib and Taji to determine which roads they took and how the ISF could not spot their convoys. They also benefited from collaborators from inside the prison, which reduced the capacity of the defenders. Except for the attack on the Counter Terrorism Centre in August 2012, which failed, if we consider that the objective was to free inmates. In the eight prison breaks that succeeded, the group tried to attack the less guarded targets and before the assaults, reduced the defensive capacity of the guards.

#### **6-Ensuring that both plans and dispositions are flexible—adaptable to circumstances.**

The planning of the prison breaks was a long-term work of infiltration. When they failed using a soft way, the attack on the prisons took place a few months later with the support of corrupted guards and inmates inside the prisons. The Tikrit prison break was followed by an attempt to dig a tunnel inside the prison to secure the escape of the prisoners. The same applied to Baghdad and the Abu Ghraib Prison. Regarding the Taji prison, an escape using a soft method succeeded in January 2013, when 12 important members of the group escaped. This element gives even more weight to the suggestion that despite its large scale, the attack on Taji was a diversion given the fact that six months previously the group had managed to free its members by an alternative method. During the campaign, the group was flexible and used techniques adaptable to each situation: soft prison breaks or armed assaults coordinated with inmates and with the help of insiders from the prison.

#### **5-Taking a line of operation which offers alternative objectives.**

This derives from the idea of putting the enemy on the “horns of a dilemma” by forcing him to disperse its forces and be indecisive. The synchronicity of the Abu Ghraib and Taji attacks, which are about 50 km apart, demonstrated the important logistical capacity of the group. Attacking both prisons at the same time was a deliberate attempt to put the ISF in Baghdad into a dilemma, which produced indecision. Ambushes against rescue teams coming from Baghdad

increased the state of paralysis of the security forces furthermore during the first hours.

**7- Do not throw your weight into a stroke whilst your opponent is on guard, while he is well placed to parry or evade**

This maxim is one that seems not to have been followed by IS during the prison break attacks. The way that IS' planners sacrificed their soldiers and the prisoners in Al Taji Prison knowing that it was a diversion does not follow LH's recommendations of not wasting human and material resources while attacking a well-defended target. At the same time, using SVBIEDs in divertive attacks makes it more "real" in order to deceive the enemy with more efficiency. Equally, during the Abu Ghraib prison break, attackers targeted the most fortified zones which were guarded such as the entrance and the military points nearby. The group's confidence in SVBIEDs to breach defence lines did not deter it from attacking strong and heavily guarded points. For that reason, IS did not follow this principle during this campaign.

**8-Do not renew an attack along the same line (or in the same form) after it has once failed.**

Testing IS' adherence to this principle can be studied in the cases where IS' first assault did not succeed and they could carry out others. Abu Muhammad Al Suweidawi and Hajji Bakr were from the first generation of Iraqi leaders who joined Zarqawi in 2003. They graduated from the same military school and were part of the same air force intelligence unit. They joined Tawheed Wal Jihad during the early months after its creation around the figure of Zarqawi. They likely participated in or at least witnessed the two failed assaults on Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 and 2005. The difference between these attacks and the one on Abu Ghraib seven years later was the poor level of intelligence they had at that time. The attackers did not coordinate with prisoners inside and did not even know that US troops had dug trenches around the prison, which made it impossible for the SVBIEDs to reach the walls. The attack this time was different in its scale, the level of preparation and the coordination that confirmed a process of lessons

learned among the group's strategists and military planners. This surge in capacity and resources in 2013 was paramount for the group in order to prepare its urban assaults. The same planners of the prison breaks were those that planned the assaults on Iraqi cities a year later. It is very likely that the attack on prisons understood as highly guarded fixed targets served as a small-scale simulation for the more significant manoeuvre of mounting urban assaults a year later. From our study of the prison attacks, a strategic pattern seemed to emerge based on a simultaneous attack on two targets (prisons or cities) with one move being a diversion while the group put most of its forces on the less guarded target.



*Map of the Fallujah region Source Google Maps*

### **3-The Battle of Fallujah in January 2014: a quick decision after a patient run**

As narrated in the tactical study on the IS' rebound, throughout the year of 2013, the group's activity in Anbar and more precisely in Fallujah expanded. As described by Middle Eastern specialist Michael Knights, the number of attacks claimed by the group rose from an average of 16 per month in the first quarter of 2013 to 31 in the last quarter of that year, with a peak of 39 incidents in December



2013<sup>494</sup>. IS' initial takeover of Fallujah and parts of Ramadi was preceded by an attack in the Horan Valley on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2013, which diverted ISF from the cities of Anbar to track down IS' cells in the Anbar desert. This decapitation attack involved three suicide bombers targeting the commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Iraqi Army Division and the commander of the 28<sup>th</sup> Brigade<sup>495</sup>. According to the press, informers lured the commanders to a house in a remote area in Rutbah under the pretext of raiding a training camp. Mohammed Ahmed al-Kurwi, commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division, was portrayed in social media by Sunni activists as the perpetrators of the Hawijah Massacre back in April 2013<sup>496</sup>.

During the night of December 30<sup>th</sup>, armed locals groups were deployed in the streets. Massed at the main Fallujah protest site, they answered calls made by leaders of the protests Abd al-Malik al-Sadi and Grand Mufti Sheikh Rafi` al-Rifai to block the road preventing reinforcements from reaching Ramadi and western Anbar. Fighting erupted between protestors and the Army in Fallujah leading to 14 casualties. The Iraqi Army retreated from the city the same night and imposed a prolonged siege on the city<sup>497</sup>. IS' convoys felt there was enough security to hold parades in daylight across the city. Before declaring Fallujah unilaterally as part of the Islamic State at Friday prayers on January 3, 2014, the group strategy was patient and pragmatic.

In order to repel ISF's assault, IS fighters in Fallujah openly cooperated with insurgent groups and tribal leaders opposed to the government. The opposition forces against the presence of the army in Anbar were linked with the protestors. They represented the military wing of pro-autonomy parties in Anbar. They had

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<sup>494</sup> Michael Knights, "The ISIL's Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor", CTC sentinel, Vol 7 Issue 5, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-isils-stand-in-the-ramadi-falluja-corridor>, p10

<sup>495</sup> Bill Rogio, "Al Qaeda suicide team kills Iraqi general, 17 officers", Long War Journal, 21/12/2013, [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/12/al\\_qaeda\\_suicide\\_tea.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/12/al_qaeda_suicide_tea.php)

<sup>496</sup> Kamal Namaa, "Iraqi militants kill at least 18 soldiers, including commander", Reuter, 21/12/2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-violence/iraqi-militants-kill-at-least-18-soldiers-including-commander-idUSBRE9BJ1BA20131221>

<sup>497</sup> Vivian Salama, "The First Iraqi City To Fall To ISIS Is A Symbol For The Fight To Come", Associated Press, 18/12/2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/the-first-iraqi-city-to-fall-to-isis-2015-1>

coordination with the military council of the Iraqi revolution, *the Karama* political party and were composed of the tribes of Al Jamila and Abu Alwan from south Fallujah. They were not against IS nor the Federal Police (composed of locals) but were in total confrontation against the Iraqi Army. The tribe of Abu Issa, which the ex-minister of Finance was from, had since 2006 been the biggest ISI enemy in the city. However, many factors forced tribal groups and their military council not to confront it.

First, as advanced by tribal fighters in the ICG report<sup>498</sup>, it was due to shortages of weapons and the group's efficiency in defending the city that created a needed buffer zone between them and the ISF. IS members were also allowed to join the military council under certain conditions such as not targeting Sahawat leaders, not imposing their agenda, and joining it as individuals.<sup>499</sup> Theoretically, they were supposed to be under the command of the military council. However, their efficiency in defending the city made the council more and more dependent on them. The more military pressure there was upon the city, the more the council needed IS fighters to defend itself. Due to its military supremacy and the dependence of the military council on its military experience and capabilities, the group ultimately gained the upper hand. In a sense, Nouri Maliki's policy in Al Anbar and the inflexibility towards tribal leaders pushed them into the arms of the group, which appeared to become vital for the city's defence.

Despite the claims that the group was subordinate to the military council, there were no real means of checking the group's decisions and it manoeuvred freely inside the city. After IS conquered the city of Fallujah in January, it changed its approach against the Sahawat leaders and the other groups by monopolising the power. Consequently, the spokesperson Abu Muhammad al Adnani made a statement on Fallujah in April 2014 in which he claimed: "We have returned to the cities and controlled the ground, and we will be killed a thousand times before

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<sup>498</sup> "Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain", Crisis Group Middle East, Report N°150, 28 April 2014, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-falluja-s-faustian-bargain>

<sup>499</sup> *ibid* p15

we think of going back. In the cities and provinces that are under our control, on top of them, Fallujah...there will be no place in it for the secularists. For Fallujah is Fallujah of the Mujahidin and Anbar is Anbar of the Mujahidin"<sup>500</sup>. By late June 2014, fighters coming from Syria seized the borders with Iraq. At least 70% of Anbar Province was under IS control, including the cities of Fallujah, Rutbah and half of Ramadi. The border town of Al Qaim was conquered after the withdrawal of Iraqi troops, offering to the group a territorial continuity with its Syrian territory and the city of Albu Kamal<sup>501</sup>.

The city of Saqlawiyah (15 km north of Fallujah and 50 km from Baghdad) was the theatre of a siege made by IS fighters to an important army base. A thousand soldiers were without support or food supply after the fall of the last supply route represented by a bridge a week before the assault. The soldiers under siege were in such a state of disarray that they "started to dig and drink dirty salt water and eat rotten tomatoes"<sup>502</sup>. On 21<sup>st</sup> September, the camp was stormed using a very original way. Soldiers interviewed by the Washington Post indicated, "They received a message coming from army commanders via walkie-talkie that a rescue mission was on its way and had taken control of a nearby bridge"<sup>503</sup>. In reality, they were IS' fighters dressed as Iraqi counterterrorism forces. As described by survivors, "The first three Humvees were ahead of the rest with some military trucks. We just let them in [...] One Humvee exploded in the middle of the camp. The two others drove to the perimeter and detonated"<sup>504</sup>.

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<sup>500</sup> Memlik Pasha, "ISIS Insurgents Have Almost Surrounded Baghdad", Vice, April 29, 2014, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/bn5vym/ISIS-Iraq-jihadists-Anbar-Fallujah-Baghdad](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/bn5vym/ISIS-Iraq-jihadists-Anbar-Fallujah-Baghdad)

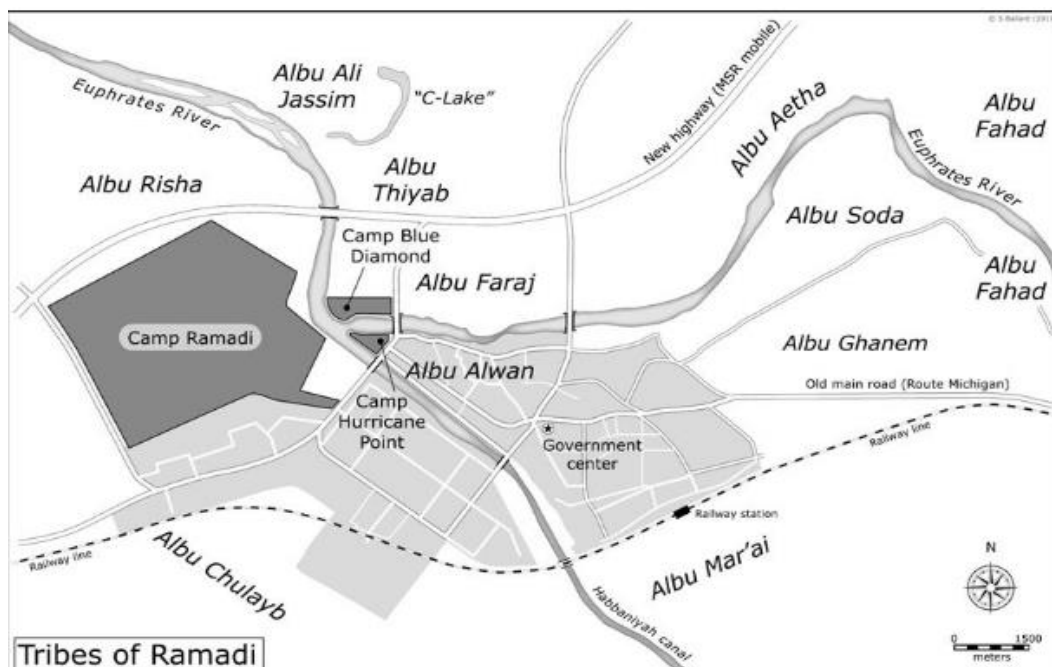
<sup>501</sup> "ISIS controls the border town of Al Qaim", Al Mada Press, 20/06/2014, <https://goo.gl/ZoYGtX>

<sup>502</sup> "Iraq... Revelations from survivors about the Saqlawiyah events", EREM News, 23/09/2014, <https://www.eremnews.com/news/world/130291>

<sup>503</sup> Loveday Morris, "Islamic State attack on Iraqi base leaves hundreds missing, shows army weaknesses", Washington Post, 22/09/2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/islamic-state-attack-on-iraqi-base-leaves-hundreds-missing-shows-army-weaknesses/2014/09/22/9a8b9e4d-0fea-4650-8816-5e720dbffd04\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.4e34ab0ca1d9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-attack-on-iraqi-base-leaves-hundreds-missing-shows-army-weaknesses/2014/09/22/9a8b9e4d-0fea-4650-8816-5e720dbffd04_story.html?utm_term=.4e34ab0ca1d9)

<sup>504</sup> Ibid

Only two hundred Iraqi soldiers were able to flee the camp while the remaining three hundred were killed or abducted by the group. There were also allegations that the group used chlorine gas in the attack, which sparked fear among the troops.<sup>505</sup> IS fighters also used the cell phones of dead soldiers to communicate with and intimidate the remaining trapped soldiers<sup>506</sup>. This episode is an example of how the group's local commanders used a deceptive manoeuvre not expected by the enemy by taking advantage of its dire situation. They surprised them in order to storm a well-entrenched base after their failure to storm it with standard means. Several guidelines of Liddle Hart's indirect approach were thus applied during this assault.



Map of Ramadi and its tribes. Source<sup>507</sup>

<sup>505</sup> "Killing of 300 Iraqi Soldiers with Chlorine Gas in Saqlawiyah", Erem News, 22/09/2014, <https://www.ereemnews.com/news/arab-world/130109>

<sup>506</sup> "Anbar Operations Commander denies that ISIS militants any phones of the soldiers of Siger and estimates that few of them are missing", Al Sumariyah, 23/09/2014, <https://goo.gl/QHF5Qm>

<sup>507</sup> Carter Malkasian, *Illusion of victory : the Anbar Awakening and the rise of the Islamic State*, Oxford university Press, 2017

## *4-Ramadi Battle January 2014-May 2015: a 14-month war of attrition.*

### **The first assault on Ramadi and stalemate in the city (January 2014-October 2014)**

Comparing to Fallujah, the situation in Ramadi was different because of the historical defiance the group suffered from tribes in the city. The same night that Fallujah was attacked, IS took advantage of the security vacuum created by ISF's decision to withdraw from the city's downtown after tribal mediation. On January the 1<sup>st</sup> of 2014, IS' sleeper cells inside the city ransacked police stations. The group also was able to spoil the weapons of the Iraqi Army and its "new Sahawat movement" led by Sheikh Mohamed Al Hais in Ramadi and Sheikh Wissam Jordan in southern Al Anbar<sup>508</sup>. Under the command of Abu Abdurrahman Al Bilawi, convoys coming from the desert seized many areas on the periphery of Ramadi. They concentrated their efforts on the weakest part of the city, avoiding clashes with powerful tribes of the Sahawat such as the Albu Alwan and the Albu Jabr. Al Bilawi's sleeper cells in Albu Farj, Albu Ali, Malahema and Khhalidiya were activated in the wake of the ISF retreat. They started from Al Jazeera and tried to storm Hamidiyah, Sofiya, Zawiya and Habaniyah, but the Albu Fahd tribe stood against them. The least defended places in Ramadi were the areas of Albu Faraj, Albu Ali, Albu Abid and the Stadium, while the best defended were the Albu Alwan, Albu Jaber Albu Risha and the downtown government complex. In fact, despite its ideological animosity and historical grief the group did not attack the other groups of the military council and focused on attacking the forces coming from outside of Anbar and its local allies. IS fighters also took advantage of the fact that ISF could not distinguish between opposition forces and IS' fighters.

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<sup>508</sup> Ibid

## **The Offensive in November/ December 2014**

The situation did not evolve much in Ramadi during the following months, while the eyes of the world were turned towards Mosul. In October of 2014, IS took the city of Hit, executing many coordinated attacks throughout the principal enemy centres in Anbar. The town of Hit was attacked from three fronts at dawn while other assaults were coordinated against the Anbar Operations Command north of Ramadi and the 7<sup>th</sup> Division headquarters at Al Assad Airbase in Al Baghdadi. These synchronised attacks were probably designed to disperse the coalition's airpower supporting the Iraqi Army<sup>509</sup>. The takeover of Hit was necessary in order to isolate further the city of Ramadi, cutting its supply lines coming from the west.

IS' second push to take the city of Ramadi occurred on 21<sup>st</sup> November of 2014. The attack started at night in the village of Al Shujairiya, situated 20km west of the city. According to military expert Hamid Shandoukh, the attack was possible after "the river dried up, which granted the possibility to IS' fighters to cross the river without using boats"<sup>510</sup>. This surprise move by taking advantage of a change in the environment surprised ISF forces in the village and attracted their allies in Ramadi. Three days later, the group attacked Ramadi's downtown part held by government forces and seized houses of the Dulaimi tribe after taking control of the Al-Mu'allimin district and the Haouz area in the centre. The attackers were able to infiltrate into neighbouring areas controlled by their enemy using small boats to cross the river<sup>511</sup> by night and infiltrating the refugee flow of civilians. The fighting focused on Ramadi's eastern Sijariya neighbourhood<sup>512</sup>. At the same time, the districts of Albu Hayis, Albu Fahd, and Albu Alwan, which were traditional strongholds of the Sahawat, also came under attack. Unlike in January

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<sup>509</sup> Billy Rogio, "Islamic State seizes Hit, assaults Iraqi military headquarters in Anbar", Long War journal, 2/10/2014, [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/10/islamic\\_state\\_seizes.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/10/islamic_state_seizes.php)

<sup>510</sup> Ahmad Al Anbari, "The attack of the Islamic State on Ramadi, a new tactic", Al Jazeera, 28/11/2014, <https://goo.gl/zVWY9N>

<sup>511</sup> Ibid

<sup>512</sup> "Militants shoot at Iraqi government building in Ramadi: officials", Reuters, 21/11/2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-city/militants-shoot-at-iraqi-government-building-in-ramadi-officials-idUSKCN0J50UT20141121>

of 2014, this time powerful Sahawat districts were targeted by the group. The Abu Fahd clan claimed that civilian refugees settled in their neighbourhood facilitated the entry of IS' fighters at 2 am. They took them to the rooftops of the houses and started to target tribal fighters with sniper rifles.

These clashes and infiltrations were intended to divert the attention of tribal fighters and prevent them from supporting the ISF entrenched in the city centre. There, IS fighters tried a push and were able to seize Ramadi's Education Directorate and were, as described in this press report, "less than 20 meters away from the government complex that includes the Anbar Council seat and other government departments, including the prison and the province's intelligence branch directorates"<sup>513</sup>. At the same time, supply lines to the Ramadi government complex represented by the roads to the Iraqi Army's 8<sup>th</sup> division in the west and Habaniyah air base in the east were cut off. However, the whole operation was thwarted because of the massive air support offered by coalition fighters. In the following days, tribal groups and the ISF were able to retake entrances that led to the al-Hoz district and push back IS' forces to their initial positions. Sporadic fighting continued during December. IS' fighters took some new areas but failed to advance towards the well-entrenched government complex. During this offensive, the group did not use a massive range of SVBIEDs in order to overwhelm the heavily fortified static defences.

### **The third push in March 2015**

During the third assault of the group on the city, this time it used new techniques with tunnels and explosives to avoid detection. On March 11<sup>th</sup> 2015, after digging an 800-foot long tunnel during two months, IS fighters detonated seven tons of explosives below the government complex, killing and wounding dozens of Iraqi soldiers<sup>514</sup>. At the same time, a major assault using waves of SVBIEDs tried to dislocate ISF's defences in the government complex. The attack

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<sup>513</sup> "Iraqi Forces In Ramadi Repel 'Fiercest, Most Violent Attack Yet' From IS", Radio Free Europe, 26/11/2014, <https://www.rferl.org/z/17257/about?p=253>

<sup>514</sup> Marcus Weisgerber, ISIS Is Using Tunnel Bombs in Iraq, Defence One, 8/6/2015, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/06/isis-using-tunnel-bombs-iraq/114730/>

failed because by using precision anti-tank missiles the defenders destroyed the SVBIEDs before they could explode. On March 15<sup>th</sup>, IS exploded another tunnel below the government complex, but without a coordinated assault. This type of operation holds a significant surprise effect and can have demoralising consequences on the enemy. However, in both cases IS could not exploit the dislocation effect of such an operation with subsequent concentrated use of SVBIEDs to overwhelm the defenders. This time, airpower was not necessary to support ISF troops entrenched in the government complex.

### **The final offensive May 2015**

IS fighters commanded by Abu Muhannad Al Suweidawi waited two months before conducting the final assault on the city's downtown. From September 2014, entrenched Iraqi troops were short of ammunition and had to purchase weapons and ammunition on the black market. Most of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division, based in the province, were combat ineffective. Tribes such as Albu Nimr were claiming to have a shortage of weapons back in December<sup>515</sup>. In contrast, IS took advantage of its freedom of movement in the Anbar desert to deploy to the Ramadi front its best troops from Anbar, Salahudeen and Aleppo. On 15<sup>th</sup> May 2015, it launched a large-scale offensive against the Albu Jabr area and the government complex. The same day it suffered the killing of the commander of the assault, Abu Muhannad Al-Suwaydawi, by a coalition airstrike. He was the planner of the Abu Ghraib prison break back in July 2013 and he had been the IS Governor for the Anbar region since 2014. The attack started at dawn with the use of 12 cars and captured Humvees as SVBIEDs. They filed behind a bulldozer against the government complex's concrete barriers and detonated, creating huge explosions. This time, the flow and pace of the SVBIED wave were so high that ISF's anti-tank units did not succeed in targeting them before their explosion. As a result, the morale of the army cracked, and some fighters began to flee. The next day, 20 additional SVBIEDs were deployed hitting Iraqi Army bases and

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<sup>515</sup> Ahmad Al Anbari, "The attack of the Islamic State on Ramadi, a new tactic", Al Jazeera, 28/11/2014, <https://goo.gl/zVWY9N>



breaching fortifications in the city. IS was able to control the downtown by the end of May 17<sup>th</sup> after using around 30 SVBIEDs for a single battle<sup>516</sup>. The Iraqi Army and its Golden Division retreated entirely from the city while the tribal militias were still resisting in their neighbourhoods but were finally overwhelmed.

Air support, which was crucial for preventing IS' assaults on the city back in November 2014, could not intervene because of a sandstorm.<sup>517</sup> During the first day, it delayed American warplanes and kept them from launching airstrikes helping the ISF and their allies. After the storm, IS' fighters and ISF troops were so intermingled in close combat that pilots could not distinguish between them. IS took profit from this momentum to overrun the city. The timing of the attack was perfectly chosen from a tactical point using the sandstorm to suppress air support for ISF troops. Politically, it coincided with the death penalty sentences pronounced by Baghdad against Sahawat leaders, which affected their will to fight. The Battle of "Abu Muhanad As-Suweidawi" as called by IS' media, unlike the attack on Mosul, was not the result of a strategic surprise but rather a positional battle, a 14 months effort to take the city.

After the takeover of the city, the group was able to achieve its strategic goals of securing a corridor and a continuous supply route of 500 km from Fallujah to Deir Ezzor in Syria. Only one city resisted the IS' 2014/15 offensive in Anbar. It was Haditha where the Sahawat led by the Jaghafiya and Abu Nimr tribes resisted while being surrounded by the group. Historically, the Jaghafiya tribe always spearheaded the fight against IS and its predecessors in the province. This city is important in IS' eyes since it is believed to be the birthplace of the Islamic State, where the *Mutayaboon* alliance took place back in 2005. Despite multiple assaults, the city never fell into IS' hands. Even Al Adnani directly threatened the tribe with complete annihilation comparing their fate to the one of the Shuweitat

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<sup>516</sup>"The Devastating Islamic State Suicide Strategy", The Soufan group Intel Brief, 28/05/2015 <http://www.soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-devastating-islamic-state-suicide-strategy/>

<sup>517</sup> Schmitt, Eric; Cooper, Helene "ISIS Fighters Seized Advantage in Iraq Attack by Striking During Sandstorm", The New York Times, 18/05/2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/19/world/middleeast/isis-fighters-seized-advantage-in-iraq-attack-by-striking-during-sandstorm.html>

tribe in Deir Ezzor<sup>518</sup>. IS tried to settle an arrangement with the tribe by proposing to the Sahawat safe passage after handing over the city without fighting but it was never accepted<sup>519</sup>.

In addition to the tribal rejection of IS in Haditha, the presence of the Iraqi Army's 8<sup>th</sup> Division and Shia militia volunteers and the air support provided by the Ain Assad airbase situated 50km south of the city explained IS' failure to take the city. From October 2014, major assaults on the city were always foiled by the fierce resistance of the tribes coupled with the systematic intervention of coalition forces stationed near the city. Even when the city of Baghdadi near the airbase fell in February 2015<sup>520</sup>, the group was not able to reach and storm Ayn Assad airbase due to the presence inside of hundreds of US Marines. The first direct clashes between IS' fighters and US Marines took place inside the airbase when inghimassi fighters succeeded in entering the facility but were quickly eliminated by the defenders. The same applies to the Taqqadum airbase in Habaniyah, (situated 74 km west of Baghdad) another strategic point of Anbar heavily fortified and defended by airplanes that was nearly impossible to overrun. The base offered to the coalition the ability to mobilise and deploy their aircraft quickly in the different theatres of operations in Anbar and beyond. The airbase was also separated from IS fighters' position by the Euphrates River. The group used the Ramadi Dam it conquered back in May 2015 in an attempt to cut off much of its flow in order to build a passage<sup>521</sup>. In front of this situation, the soldiers stationed at the airbase were pumping water in from nearby Habaniyah Lake to keep levels

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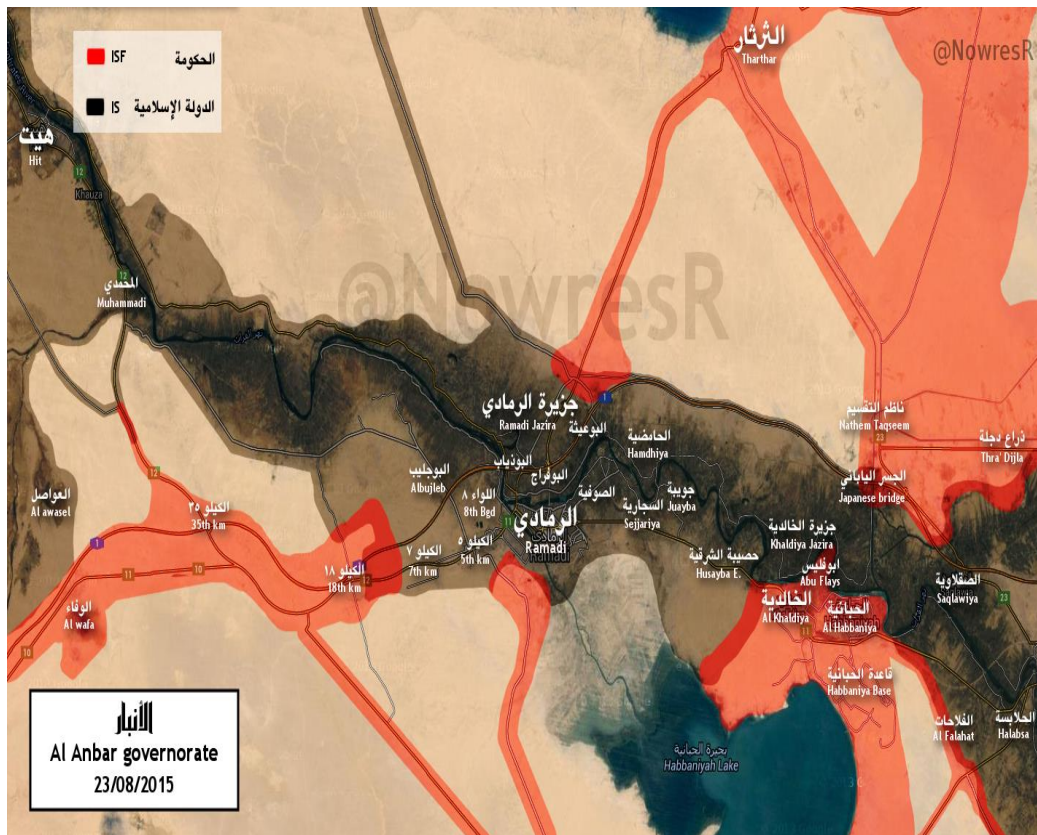
<sup>518</sup> Jihadology, New audio message from The Islamic State's Shaykh Abū Muḥammad al 'Adnānī al-Shāmī: "And Those Who Lived [In Faith] Would Live Upon Evidence", 21/05/2016, <https://jihadology.net/2016/05/21/new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-mu%e1%b8%a5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-and-those-who-lived-in-faith-would-live-upon-evidence/>

<sup>519</sup> "Negotiations between armed men and tribal leaders to peacefully let them enter", Al Mada Press, 1/07/2014, <https://goo.gl/8kpWWX>

<sup>520</sup> "Islamic State fighters seize western Iraqi town: officials", Reuters, 12/02/2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-anbar/islamic-state-fighters-seize-western-iraqi-town-officials-idUSKBN0LG23120150212>

<sup>521</sup> Nick Paton Walsh and Hamdi Alkhshali, "Bullets fly on ISIS front line as Iraqis prepare for battle", CNN, 9/06/2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/08/middleeast/habbaniyah-ramadi-fightback-against-isis/index.html>

high. Both airbases and the city of Haditha resisted IS' assaults, which demonstrates that the group was not an irresistible force in 2014 and could be stopped by the combination of two factors: active air support and the intact fighting spirit of ground troops whether from the tribes, Shia militias or the army.



Map showing the territories controlled by IS (in black) in Anbar creating a corridor from Fallujah to Hit (23/08/2015) <sup>522</sup>

### [5-North east offensive and the takeover of Nineveh province](#)

The province of Nineveh remained, even after the US withdrawal and the relative pacification of the country, the last stronghold for the group. Back in 2008, ISI identified it as a critical region for its logistics and freedom of movement in order to maintain its connection with Syria. From 2013, the Al Jazeera desert, which is traversable by vehicles, offered a vast 'no man's land' for its convoys,

<sup>522</sup> Source twitter social media account NowreR

from which reinforcements from Syria could arrive. IS' other focal point in the governorate was to isolate the city of Mosul from Baghdad by controlling or disturbing ISF's provision routes around the axis Shirqat –Qayara –Shura. While the Anbar crisis occupied three Iraqi military divisions to fight IS and the tribes, the security situation started to deteriorate seriously in Nineveh with the setup of fake checkpoints and surge in attacks throughout the Baghdad – Mosul highway. We saw in the analysis of IS' claimed operations how the months of January and February were the ones where the group confronted the ISF at a magnitude never seen before.

A couple of months later, the events leading to the takeover of large parts of the northern Iraqi territory started with a blow for the group, the death of the alleged mastermind of the assault. Abu Mohamad Al Bilawi was killed on June 4<sup>th</sup>; while surrounded by ISF he detonated his explosive belt. Instead of preventing the assault on Mosul, his death did not change the planning of IS' grand offensive and likely accelerated it. Al Bilawi was for IS the chief of the general military council in Iraq. He graduated from military school in 1993 and joined Tawheed Wal-Jihad in 2003 as a captain of the Iraqi Army forming the first nucleus of the Iraqi commandants surrounding Zarqawi.

### **The divertive attack on Samarra (5<sup>th</sup> June)**

The North Eastern offensive started in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's birthplace, the city of Samarra, in Salahudeen. Samarra, because of its symbolic value, is considered as one of the most sacred places for Shias and is a hotbed for Sunni groups allied with the government in Baghdad such as the Islamic Party (Muslim Brotherhood-oriented party). On the midnight of 5<sup>th</sup> of June, 150 fighters attacked the city from the south using pickups mounted with anti-aircraft guns. According to local reports<sup>523</sup>, they came from the south and more precisely the Hamrin Mountains. According to the eulogy of IS leader in Libya killed in 2015, Abu Nabil

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<sup>523</sup> Joel Wing, "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant storms Samarra in Salahudine", Musing on Iraq, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2014, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com.es/2014/06/islamic-state-of-iraq-and-levant-storm.html>

al-Anbari was leading the assault as governor of Salahudeen Province. The chief of operations in Samarra confirmed that convoys attacked three neighbourhoods on the eastern side of the city.<sup>524</sup> IS' fighters quickly captured five<sup>525</sup> of its seven districts including the main municipal building and the university. They were only 4km away from downtown when police retreated its positions to the Al-Askari Mosque. Its cells also had specific targets inside the city and a kill list of prominent Sunni figures collaborating with the government. The house of the Minister of Science and Technology and members of the Islamic Party were targeted in their houses<sup>526</sup>. Also, in order for the group to gain fluidity and move faster, bulldozers were used to destroy walls and checkpoints across the city while a bridge was demolished in order to prevent any reinforcements from entering.

Nevertheless, by the end of the day, reinforcements from the Golden Division backed by helicopters pushed back the militants outside of the city. The army claimed to have killed 40 IS fighters while 60 security forces were killed and wounded. Just like in Shura a couple of months before, armed men entered in mosques and called people to join them for jihad<sup>527</sup>. According to journalist Wassim Nasr's contact inside the group, the goal of such raids was to target the "traitors helping Maliki governments, terrorise them and dissuade the others"<sup>528</sup>. The main objective of the operation was to attack Islamic party members in the city. Ibn Rafydayn, who is a member of IS' media department, gave details about the raids: "The police stations fell quickly one after the other; they did not expect that would come to us in Samarra, where they thought they were safe. We

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<sup>524</sup> "The chief of Operation in Samarra narrates the details of the operation", Buratha News Agency, 5/06/2014, <http://burathanews.com/arabic/news/238395>

<sup>525</sup> According to Al Furat News Agency those areas includes al-Shuhadaa, Muthanna, al-Jajabiria, al-Jamea and al-Khadraa, and Muthanna, and Alajabiria. See "Army aviation starts attacks against ISIL in Samarra district", Al Forat News, 5/06/2014, <http://en.alforatnews.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=7949>

<sup>526</sup> "Assassination of the bodyguards of the minister of Science after the entrance on his house", Buratha News Agency, 5/06/2014, <http://burathanews.com/arabic/news/238363>

<sup>527</sup> "Death toll in Samarra rises to 50 with vehicles holding ISIS flags and mosques calling for Jihad", Al Mada Press, 5/06/2014, <https://goo.gl/9QRyHS>

<sup>528</sup> Wassim Nasr, *Etat Islamique : le fait accompli*, Tribune du Monde Plon, Paris, April 2016, p102

followed a precise plan from which we did not deviate. We wanted to disperse government forces to decrease the pressure on Fallujah. We made raids on Suleiman Bek and the outskirts of Mosul. Everything was coordinated; it was just the start of the bigger operation”<sup>529</sup>. He confirmed that the previous assaults on Suleiman Bek and Shura were incursions planned in order to “test the readiness of government forces in the cities, their coordination and response time” <sup>530</sup>. Samarra’s raid was, according to this IS operative, part of a broader plan executed in order to disperse the Iraqi Army and ease the pressure on Anbar. The specificity of the Samarra raid is its conformity with the concept of “alternative objectives” following the traditional principles of concealment of aim, surprise and distraction. As defended by Liddle Hart, this concept is a low-cost method of distraction, because it allowed the group to mobilise the bulk of its forces to its real objective, which was Mosul. In Samarra, there was no intention to grasp terrain nor attack the Askari Mosque but to occupy the city briefly, attract the army while targeting the government’s collaborators inside it.

During that operation, the mobility of the convoy was vital in order to move quickly at dawn with maximum concealment for an utter surprise. The convoy was coming from Hamrin Valley to attack Samarra and the Al Jazeera desert to attack Mosul. Because of their vulnerability to airpower, IS convoys can only rely on dispersed movement on clandestine roads for its convoys. This first operation was thought in order to disperse Iraqi forces, which were concentrating their forces in Anbar. Throughout its offensive IS’ great mobility permitted its fighters to concentrate on chosen objectives in a short period. As argued by Liddle Hart<sup>531</sup>, concentrated mass attacks are counterproductive because they give the enemy time to concentrate. A dispersed attack will not generate a strong defence but rather a parallel dispersion of force.

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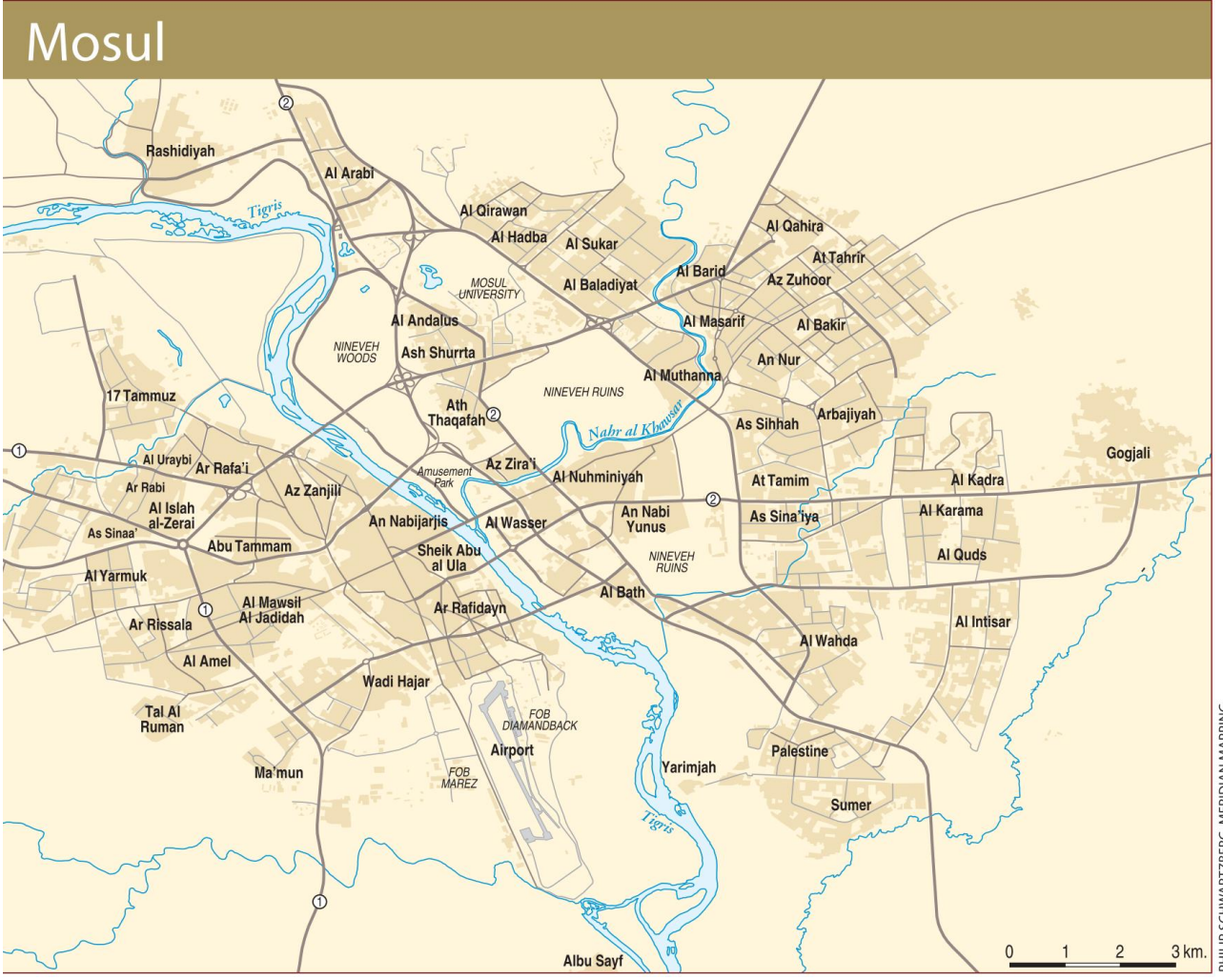
<sup>529</sup> Ibid p103

<sup>530</sup> Ibid p104

<sup>531</sup> Squadron Leader R. A. Mason, “Sir Basil Liddell Hart and the Strategy of the Indirect Approach”, Royal United Services Institution. Journal, 115:658, 1970, p39, 10.1080/03071847009421705



Map showing the simultaneous attack on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> June on Samarra and Mosul with the original place of deployment of IS' fighters



**Map of the city of Mosul. Source Institute for the Study of War**

**The 6<sup>th</sup> June assault on Mosul**

It took two days for IS fighters to take control of the second biggest city in Iraq, causing the collapse of four Iraqi divisions and the capture or deaths of thousands of soldiers. During the months preceding the attack, the general situation was deteriorating, and many areas in Nineveh were left without the presence of the security forces. This security vacuum offered the group the freedom of movement it needed for preparing the attack. As we saw in the tactical analysis of IS’ rebound, the Nineveh region was the most targeted one by the group. While the months of January and February in Nineveh were its most active months in terms of volume of operations claimed. According to a press report,



four army divisions were deployed in Mosul and the rest of the 17 cities and townships of Nineveh Province<sup>532</sup>. So how did 2000 fighters overrun four ISF divisions and take the whole governorate in a few days?

According to the commission established by the Iraqi parliament in order to explain the fall of the city, authorities had prior intelligence about a forthcoming attack against the city<sup>533</sup>. In May of 2014, it is said that the intelligence services in Nineveh knew about an attack prepared for June. The last report about an imminent attack was dated the 5<sup>th</sup> of June, the day before the assault on the city. It included the testimony of a high-ranking detained leader detailing the attack and the front lines the group was planning to follow. In order to prevent it, the authorities imposed a curfew on vehicles on the same day. Despite these warnings about a particular attack, the security forces were taken by surprise a day later. At that time, the authorities received the Intel about an imminent attack but could not exploit it due to the amount of information they received.

During the midnight of 6<sup>th</sup> of June, a convoy of 100 pickup trucks with at least four fighters per vehicle was advancing from the Al Jazeera desert west of Mosul. By 3:30 am, IS fighters advanced into the western district of the city (Musherfa, Haramut, Tamozi 17, Hay Tanak and Hay Al Islah al Ziraiz). This part of the city was the less defended one. In the district of Mushayrifa, there were only 40 soldiers on duty that night<sup>534</sup>. IS fighters were able to destroy the checkpoints and storm a police station in the Tamozi 17 neighbourhood. An IS media wing member interviewed by Wassim Nasr confirmed that "Fighting started after dawn, brothers started to deploy in the right side of the city. Police stations and checkpoints

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<sup>532</sup> Ghazi Hars, "The fall of Mosul: anatomy of the city's collapse", Rudaw, 10/06/2015, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/100620153>

<sup>533</sup> "The investigation regarding the Fall of Mosul reveals the responsibility of Maliki and other high ranking officials", Al Watan News, 19/08/2015, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/789454>

<sup>534</sup> "Special Report: How Mosul fell - An Iraqi general disputes Baghdad's story", Reuters, 14/10/2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-gharawi-special-report-idUSKCN0I30Z820141014>

started to fall without resistance. Quickly the eastern side was under our control, and government forces could not reach their troops there. They bombarded the whole area blindly”<sup>535</sup>.

Lieutenant Mahdi Al Gharawi told Reuters that “the city’s defenders were ill-supplied since much of the defenders’ armour and heavy weapons had been ordered to the south to help retake Ramadi and other Anbar Province towns during the January fighting”.<sup>536</sup> Colonel Dhiyab Ahmed al-Assi al-Obeidi added that in their battalion they had only one machine gun while IS had one in each pickup. The deployment in Anbar of heavy weaponry from Mosul left the city with virtually no defence. Also, the first line of defence, which was supposed to have 2,500 men from the 6<sup>th</sup> brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Iraqi army division, was closer to 500.

In all, according to Reuters, there were supposed to be close to 25,000 soldiers and police in the city. In reality, there were at best 10,000. If we take this number, the ratio was 5:1 as at its peak when 2000 IS fighters were deployed in the city. When entering Mosul, IS’ strategists targeted the lines of least expectation and hence of least resistance. It can be assumed that before the assault, the group managed to infiltrate fighters in the city and activate an effective combat support infrastructure inside. At the same time, the response of the Iraqi Army was to send helicopters and bomb residential areas blindly resulting in the killing of dozens of civilians<sup>537</sup>.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of June, the situation was limited to the western edge of the Tamozi 17 neighbourhood. Gharawi received a call from the Iraqi President Al Maliki ordering him to hold things until his replacement by Qanbar, the deputy chief of staff at the defence ministry, and Ghaidan, the commander of Iraqi ground forces. According to Gharawi and the chief of staff General Babakir Zebari, there were not sufficient forces in the city in order to launch a counter attack. This dire

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<sup>535</sup> Wassim Nasr, *Etat Islamique le fait accompli*, Tribune du Monde Plon, Paris, April 2016, p104

<sup>536</sup> Joby Warrick, *Black Flags, The Rise of ISIS*, BANTAM PRESS, London 2015, p302-303

<sup>537</sup> “How did extremists take over one of Iraq’s biggest cities in just five days?”, Niqash, 10/06/2014, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/3455/>

situation was emphasised by Maliki's rejection of Peshmerga's proposition to send their forces to the city. From the radio transmission between Gharawi and his troops, it also appears that he was desperately asking for air support, which never came.<sup>538</sup> The fact that the air support did not come can be explained by Hashim's description<sup>539</sup> of the assault, where he affirms that Qiyara airbase and Shirqat airport were under assault during the attack on Mosul. What characterises the success of this attack was excepting the use of helicopters the absence of air support for the Iraqi troops.

Facing a situation of turmoil and indecision among the Iraqi forces, IS responded by sending additional forces to the city. On June 8<sup>th</sup> more than 100 vehicles with at least 400 men crossed from Syria to join the battle. IS' fighters on the western flank despite being under heavy shelling of Iraqi artillery, were able to penetrate the al-Uraybi neighbourhood and were close to the area around the Mosul Hotel where 30 SWAT members were stationed. The new commanders Ghaidan and Qanbar ordered a divisional commander to defend the Mosul Hotel, which he refused knowing that most of its soldiers had deserted. The decision to sack him in the midst of the battle emphasised the state of disarray among the Iraqi troops preceding their psychological dislocation.

At 4.30 pm, an IS fighter originating from the Arabian Peninsula raced towards the Mosul Hotel and exploded his military water tanker. The SVBIED wiped out the building and its occupants. High-ranking officers from the police were killed, among them the general chief of the fourth brigade of the SWAT in Nineveh, Diyab el Obeidi. After this blow, massive desertion started among the Federal Police in the districts of New Mosul and Arrisala. Following that episode, the defensive line in the western part of the city crumbled. Soldiers and police officers were left without any plan or rallying point and started to run when IS' fighters were closing on their positions.

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<sup>538</sup> "Dangerous revelations emerge one year after the Fall of Mosul" , Deutsche Welle Arabic , 10/06/2015, <https://goo.gl/8CxdQ4>

<sup>539</sup> Ahmed S Hashim , *the Caliphate at war*, Hurst and Company London, 2017, p208

By June 9<sup>th</sup>, most of the western side of the city was under IS' control. The eastern side and the south of the city and its military airport were still under governmental control. The same day, IS fighters stormed the base of the 3<sup>rd</sup> division in the Thawra district situated west of Mosul. The base was surrounded for three days and stormed from all four sides with the use of an SVBIED. By Monday morning, there was a siege of the governorate in Mosul, as well as the HQ of the police of Nineveh, Mosul airport and the Ghazlani Military Base.

The Iraqi Army 2<sup>nd</sup> Division was still deployed on the eastern side of the city and prepared to defend it. However, the retreat of the commanders from the military airport used as an operational centre on the west flank caused chaos and depression among them. Qanbar and Ghaidan, who were reporting directly to Maliki, decided to retreat in a convoy of 30 vehicles and regroup on the eastern side of the city. Reports emerged that they escaped disguised as civilians fleeing to Erbil to fly back to Baghdad. According to Reuter's interview of high-ranking military personnel, the retreating convoy "created the impression that Iraq's security forces were deserting"<sup>540</sup>. Athil Al Nujaifi, the governor, explained that soldiers assumed their leaders had fled and deserted the city's eastern part.

Instead of reassuring its troops to prepare a counter attack, the decision sparked an irrational wave of defections among the rest of its troops. The lack of confidence between the leaders and their troops was behind their assumption that their commanders had abandoned them. It provoked a chaotic situation which led to IS' advance and control of the other half of the city without fighting. According to the commission, IS amplified the chaos among Iraqi troops by spreading the news that the leadership was retreating from the city<sup>541</sup>. Without shooting a single bullet on the eastern side, IS intoxicated the soldiers' minds and

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<sup>540</sup> "Special Report: How Mosul fell - An Iraqi general disputes Baghdad's story", Reuters, 14/10/2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-gharawi-special-report-idUSKCN0I30Z820141014>

<sup>541</sup> "The investigation regarding the Fall of Mosul reveals the responsibility of Maliki and other high ranking officials", Al Watan News, 19/08/2015, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/789454>

confidence. Civilians started to quit the city in huge numbers, breaking the curfew imposed, to flee towards Erbil. Many soldiers changed their clothes and mingled among them.<sup>542</sup> This episode confirms the importance of psychological dislocation emphasised by the indirect approach to explain decisive military victory. Panicked men at a low level of the ISF did much more harm than the number of Iraqi soldiers casualties inflicted by IS soldiers during the assault. When an enemy commander is at a disadvantage, and its troops lose confidence in him, according to Liddle Hart psychological dislocation is near, and the Mosul case study confirmed this. On June 12<sup>th</sup> a statement by the group was released taking responsibility for the attack and paying tribute to its mastermind Abu Abdul Rahman Al-Bilawi. It also gave details of the planning and achievements of IS' takeover<sup>543</sup>. It confirmed that extensive intelligence work had prepared the assault. During the first 72 hours after its takeover of the city, the group had a special list of personalities to eliminate<sup>544</sup>. We can assume that the group's intelligence units also spotted the ghost soldiers phenomenon among the troops stationed in Mosul and the level of unpreparedness of ISF.

### **Conclusion on Mosul's fall**

The synchronicity of IS' attack with Anbar's operations and the raid on Samarra shows how different battlefields in Iraq were interconnected in the minds of IS' strategists. Fighting in Anbar attracted most of the ISF heavy weaponry; as a result, no tanks and no heavy artillery were in their hands in Nineveh. The attack

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<sup>542</sup> "What happened the day before Mosul's fall", Irfa Sawtak, 9/06/2017, <https://www.irfaasawtak.com/a/369550.html>

<sup>543</sup> "By guidance from our leadership, the leadership of the ISIS, favoured by Allah, the brothers in the ISIS camps began drawing up precise plans to conquer the entire Wilaya and purge it of apostates. This blessed battle began by intelligence jihad by the special detachments whereby the apostates' weak areas were studied and then the military force entered the city of Mosul from several directions and by the grace of Allah took complete control of their headquarters, including the Ghazlani HQ, the operations command, the second division HQ, Badush and Tasfirat prisons, and the headquarters of the battalions and brigades. Thousands of prisoners were also released as well as some female prisoners, and the praise and grace is to Allah. And now there is complete control over all internal and external access points to the Wilaya and with Allah's permission this series of blessed incursions that delight the eyes of the monotheists shall not cease either till Allah fulfils his promise or we shall perish..."

<sup>544</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: inside The Army of Terror*, Reagan Arts, 2015, p290

on Samarra the day before created a dilemma for the Iraqi command between defending Samarra, which was attacked two days previously and send reinforcements to Mosul. Meanwhile, the war was continuing in Al Anbar theatre of operation, which mobilised much of the Iraqi Army's heavy equipment or troops. On Saturday, at the same time as the assault on Mosul, the University of Anbar at Ramadi, which had 10,000 students, was attacked while seven bombs exploded in an hour in Baghdad, killing at least 52 people.<sup>545</sup>

The attack on Mosul was well prepared because other similar urban assaults on a smaller scale had been set up in Shura and Suleiman Bik. The group tested the enemy's readiness before the offensive. According to a Reuters report on the city's fall, "the jihadists hoped only to take a neighbourhood for several hours. They did not expect state control to crumble"<sup>546</sup>. Whether or not IS' objective was to take over the whole city or occupy some neighbourhoods remains unclear. The fact that IS did not bring its full force on the first day but instead waited until the second day of the assault shows that the first assault was limited to test the defence of the Iraqi Army and grasp some territories. The group did not risk using all its forces during the first day of the attack.

Two days later, the injection of reinforcements and their mobility was vital in order to secure the final push on the western side of the city. The mobility of IS' convoys of 4x4s was key in order to bring reinforcements to maintain the pressure on the remaining Iraqi troops on the western side of the city. On the first day of the assault, 400 fighters were involved; later this number increased to almost 2000, counting the reinforcements coming from Syria and the activated sleeper cells. The surprise for IS was not the takeover of the districts of the western part but rather the massive defections on the eastern side, where the entire 2<sup>nd</sup> division, which had the manpower and equipment to resist a possible assault, fled. As

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<sup>545</sup>"Iraq university hostages' ordeal ends in Ramadi", BBC news, 7/06/2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27746048>

<sup>546</sup>"Special Report: How Mosul fell - An Iraqi general disputes Baghdad's story", Reuters, 14/10/2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-gharawi-special-report-idUSKCN0I30Z820141014>

detailed by Ahmed Hashim, IS' troops inside the city showed a high degree of battlefield tactical skills<sup>547</sup>. Mobility and flexibility coupled with deception and concealment proved that the group was mastering urban warfare. Reserve units were concealed and in battle position at the disposal of the commanders to reinforce the troops on the frontline.

As we saw, the battle was highly dependent on the troops' morale and confidence in its leaders. While IS troops lost the mastermind of the attack a few days before the assault on June 4<sup>th</sup>, it did not prevent them from executing it following a well-established plan. In contrast, because of the lack of confidence towards their commanders, Iraqi troops misinterpreted their move and retreated fearing that they abandoned them. Using LH's terms, IS' assaults combined with the campaign to target soldiers in the city succeeded in breaking ISF's psychological equilibrium.

Psychologically, the dislocation may have been achieved by weakening the troops, or the commanders, or both. In the example of Mosul's troops, the psychological equilibrium was broken before the physical one. From a psychological perspective, the detonation of multiple large-scale SVBIEDs had a specific demoralising effect on the enemy. In Mosul, the SVBIED that led to the destruction of the Mosul Hotel triggered ISF's collapse in the western part of the city. Inversely, it also had a moralising effect on IS' troops and gave them more zeal and enthusiasm to penetrate the breach created by the explosion.

As theorised by Little Hart, to achieve a decisive victory dislocation should be both physical and psychological. On the western side of the city, it became psychological and physical when the SVBIED destroyed the Mosul Hotel where the SWAT teams were entrenched. On the eastern side, without firing a single bullet, dislocation was only psychological because of soldiers' misinterpretation coupled with the spreading by IS of rumours that the higher commandant had retreated from the military airport. This strategy has been the most successful because the economy of resources achieved.

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<sup>547</sup> Ahmed S Hashim , *The Caliphate at war*, Hurst and Company ,London, 2017, p208

The reasons behind the fall of Mosul have been traced back primarily to the crisis inside the Iraqi Army following the 2011 US withdrawal. The massive desertion on the eastern side was triggered by the lack of confidence of the troops in their commanders. As Liddle Hart stated, “the impression made in the mind of the opposing commander can nullify the whole fighting power that his troops possess”<sup>548</sup>, and this seems to have occurred in Mosul. According to Dodge<sup>549</sup>, widespread corruption seriously undermined the ability of the Iraqi Army to fight and had a negative impact on their morale. The fact that most of the soldiers were from the south and did not have ties with the city explains their minimal will to resist when defending the city. In a fight to defend their homeland, the resistance would have been higher. Moreover, soldiers in Mosul had to pay for their provisions and cook their food,<sup>550</sup> undermining their trust in their leadership as well as sapping their morale. The Iraqi army suffered from “ghost payrolls” with thousands of fictitious soldiers paid by the Ministry of Defence. This fraud was estimated to have cost 25% of its annual wage budget. The politicisation of the Iraqi military by Maliki has also been pointed out. His office is said to have established an unchecked control over the army, Special Forces and the intelligence services. The politicisation of the higher ranks of the armed forces had adverse effects that were visible during the collapse of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division in Mosul and the indecision of the Iraqi high command structure.

Finally, other local nationalist groups are said to have participated in the attack. According to interviews with locals made by researchers, other armed groups took the streets during the fall of the city and showed slogans that were not accepted by the new conquerors of the city<sup>551</sup>. IS was the spearhead of the assault, which was planned and executed by its fighters. We can assume that

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<sup>548</sup> Ibid p 228

<sup>549</sup> O’Driscoll, D, “Autonomy impaired: Centralisation, authoritarianism, and the failing Iraqi state”, *Ethnopolitics*, 1-18, 2015, [http:// dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2015.1086126](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2015.1086126)

<sup>550</sup> Ibid

<sup>551</sup> Abdulrazaq, T Stansfield, GRV, “The Enemy Within: ISIS and the Conquest of Mosul”, *The Middle East Journal*, Volume 70, Number 4, Autumn 2016, <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/21135>



other armed groups took advantage of the situation inside the city by bandwagoning on the assault. It could explain why a few days later they vanished from the streets. The situation was completely different from the fall of Ramadi and Fallujah, where the group had to deal with insurgent groups. IS imposed its rule on the city quickly, made other groups pledge allegiance to Baghdadi and deterred others from challenging its rule. Like in Anbar, it refrained from attacking powerful actors on the ground. In this case, it did not attack the Peshmerga forces, which also did not take part in the battle. An IS' fighter interviewed by Wassim Nasr confirmed that "250 Peshmerga vehicles entered the city the day before to take away their members"<sup>552</sup>. This move before the assault suggests that Kurdish forces were aware of something taking place and adopted a neutral posture after Maliki's refusal to let them take back the city.

### **The August 2014 offensive on Kurdistan**

In the aftermath of the successful takeover of the city of Mosul, IS' first objective was to liberate prisons. It opened Badush Prison, where 3 000 inmates were imprisoned. Then it focused its offensive towards the city of Tel Afar in order to secure the border region with Syria and guarantee its freedom of movement, and it started to push south towards Salahudeen. On 23 June, insurgents captured the Tal Afar airport and secured the town itself. While still engaged in Salahudeen and Anbar and a month after announcing the establishment of the caliphate, IS launched a new offensive from Nineveh in order to expand its territory in Northern Iraq. IS surprised the Government of KGR and penetrated deep into its territories. During the first half of August, it conquered the cities of Zumar, Sinjar, Wana, tel Mosul Dam, Tel Keppe and Kocho, in the south and east of Mosul the towns of Karamlish, Bartella and Makhmour. Its convoys also advanced within 40 km of the Kurdish capital of Erbil before being bombed by US aircraft. IS' convoys could move easily on the surface plains of Nineveh breaching Peshmerga lines, which were surprised. Being overstretched all along the border with Iraq, under-equipped and with little will to fight in zones, which were not Kurdish, the Peshmerga were rapidly overrun. KRG leaders were not expecting

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<sup>552</sup> Wassim Nasr, *Etat Islamique le fait accompli*, Tribune du Monde Plon, Paris, April 2016, p104

an attack and posted only light infantry in most of the frontlines. IS had heavy weaponry captured from the Iraqi Army, which offered to its fighters a serious advantage against the Peshmerga. Even Washington and its intelligence services were caught by surprise, thinking that IS would concentrate its efforts against Baghdad and thought that Peshmerga's strength would have deterred IS.

## **6-The Salahudeen offensive and the failed push towards the Northern Baghdad belt**

Just after Mosul's fall, the collapse of a part of the Iraqi military was certain in Northern Iraq. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Division fled in Mosul; the 1<sup>st</sup> Division lost four brigades in Anbar and Salahudeen, two brigades of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division vanished. IS took advantage by advancing south towards Baiji and its refinery and Tikrit. Brett McGurk attributed this collapse to the social media campaign orchestrated by IS "indicating that ISIL columns would soon be heading down the Tigris River Valley to Baghdad with no mercy for anyone who resisted"<sup>553</sup>. According to McGurk, five Iraqi Army and Federal Police divisions (out of 18 in total) vanished during the next days. The rumours about an imminent attack on Baghdad and Salahudeen created a fog moment when the Iraqi Army was disoriented. In Northern Samarra, a range of cities quickly fell into the hands of the group on both sides of the Tigris River: Tikrit, Adour, Al Alam, Baiji, Shirqat and Zowiya. For the Iraqi Government, Samarra was the place to defend at all costs in the governorate. Also, the city of Balad, which is the place of a Shia mausoleum, was also highly guarded by Shia militias. As a result, the group tried to circumvent both cities in its offensive.

### **The Tikrit offensive**

The city of Tikrit was attacked on June 11<sup>th</sup> from the north with IS fighters managing to take the police and the governorate HQ. The city fell quickly, half of

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<sup>553</sup> "House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing: Terrorist March in Iraq: the U.S. Response, Statement for the Record: Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk", 23/07/2014, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20140723/102485/HHRG-113-FA00-Wstate-McGurkB-20140723.pdf>

the 4<sup>th</sup> Division disappeared and the other half were annihilated by the group in the infamous Speicher massacre on June 12 2014. The only resistance in the city came from the Juburi tribe and the suburb of Hay Al Alam where they were crushed and wiped out. During June and July, the Iraqi Army tried many counteroffensives to take back Tikrit and its surroundings but ultimately failed. This occasion was the first to test IS' defensive capabilities after the fall of Mosul. On 16<sup>th</sup> July, the Iraqi Army was about to declare the city liberated when reaching its downtown without a fight, its troops were ambushed and trapped. Suddenly, ambushes and suicide bombers "leaping from windows"<sup>554</sup> decimated the ISF.

The ways used by the group to take over cities defended by tribes and the local police varied and were adaptable to the circumstances. On June 23, IS managed to take over the city of Alam (situated west of Tikrit) after negotiating with its inhabitants for two weeks.<sup>555</sup> They offered the inhabitants the possibility of conducting mixed patrols of IS and tribal fighters inside the city in exchange for the repentance of local security forces. In this case, instead of attacking the area or pounding it, the group opted for a negotiated settlement to enter the city. At the same time, it used a more brutal approach against the village of Zawiya, whose inhabitants refused to surrender. It pounded it relentlessly with mortars, destroying the village. By using this method, IS tried to make an example to population of the governorate because its people tried to "break the rules of the Islamic State"<sup>556</sup>. In Amerli, a Turkmen Shia city, the group imposed a siege on its inhabitants, cutting water and electricity and starving them out before being dislodged 80 days later by the ISF and the Peshmerga in August 2014. Despite the collapse of part of the Iraqi Army in Salahudeen, IS' fighters in their advance encountered resistance from tribal fighters. Generally, they lacked support from

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<sup>554</sup> Alissa Rubin and Suadad al-Salhy, "For Iraq, Debacle in Tikrit as Forces Walk Into Trap Set by Militants," New York Times, July 16, 2014

<sup>555</sup> "ISIS fighters agree with the people of Alam the entrance to their area with the condition of give them a local leader from Jabara clan", Al Mada Press, 23/06/2014, <https://goo.gl/UjmrTr>

<sup>556</sup> Maggie Fick and Isra' al-Rubei'l, "Islamic State crushes and coerces on march towards Baghdad", Reuters, 22/07/2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-islamicstate-insight/islamic-state-crushes-and-coerces-on-march-towards-baghdad-idUSKBN0FR0JU20140722>

the Iraqi Army meaning that IS could over-match them. However, in the case of Dhuluiyah, the level of resistance of tribes was of another magnitude.

### **The battle for Dhuluiyah: the turning point**



**Map showing IS' offensive on Dhuluiyah on July 14<sup>th</sup> 2014**

The city of Dhuluiyah is situated 32km southeast of Samarra. On July 14<sup>th</sup>, IS attacked it but was prevented from entering the southern part of the city by members of the Jubur tribe and the local police. In its push towards Baghdad, IS' strategy in Salahudeen was to bypass nodes of resistance, such as Samarra and Balad, that would likely stop its advance. The only passage in order to access to the highway leading to Baghdad and its Northern Belt was through the city of Dhuluiyah, which takes the shape of a Presque-isle. IS tried without success to negotiate a settlement with the inhabitants in order to enter the southern part of the city without fighting.

Its assault was preceded by a VBIED attack on the bridge that connected the district to Balad in order to prevent reinforcements from arriving. IS took control of the northern part of the town after bombing government buildings, including a court and local council headquarters. The Jubur tribe in the southern part of the city showed a fierce resistance to IS' advance of convoys. They even nicknamed their fight as "the battle of walls". Their area was surrounded from three sides and the bridges accessing the city were destroyed. The only route by which the fighters could access the left bank of the river was by going through Al Jabur's agricultural lands (orange and palm trees). This dense vegetation was not suitable for armoured vehicles and contributed to halting IS' advance. It disturbed its plans to reach the highway heading to Baghdad and connect with its cells in the Northern belt of the capital. The siege of this tiny piece of land lasted for 200 days. The Jubur tribe were able to resist thanks to the support and ammunition coming from Shia militias in Balad and the air support of the Iraqi Army from Balad airbase. IS pounded the area relentlessly with mortars and perhaps chlorine<sup>557</sup> but was not able to breach the defences.

Indeed, the topography did not help the attackers to use SVBIEDs against the defences due to the dense vegetation. As a countermeasure, IS polluted the Ishaqi river<sup>558</sup> with oil in December of 2014, which passed by the city in order to isolate it further. Stopped in Dhuluiyah, IS tried to divert the attention of the defenders and their supporting forces by attacking other cities in the area. It infiltrated its forces through the river and attacked the outskirts of cities situated on the western flank. In September, it launched an attack on the Dujail region<sup>559</sup> and in October and November on the outskirts of Balad<sup>560</sup>. Both night assaults

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<sup>557</sup> "Iraq : ISIS use chlorine in attacking Dhuluiyah in Southern Tikrit", 39/09/2014, Al Ahed News, <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/101765/161/rss.php?cid=161>

<sup>558</sup> "ISIS pollutes the river Ishaqi and the people of Balad ask Baghdad to fix it and send them reinforcements", Al Mada Press, 20/12/2014, <https://goo.gl/o851ta>

<sup>559</sup> " The Iraqi Army and the tribes stop an ISIS attack on Dujail", Fars News Agency, 27 / 09/2014, [http://ar.farsnews.com/middle\\_east/news/13930705000436](http://ar.farsnews.com/middle_east/news/13930705000436)

<sup>560</sup> "ISIS attacks the area of Balad from three axis and wounding of civilians because of the mortar fire", Al Sumariyah, 21/11/2014 , <https://www.alsumaaria.tv/news/116869/#>

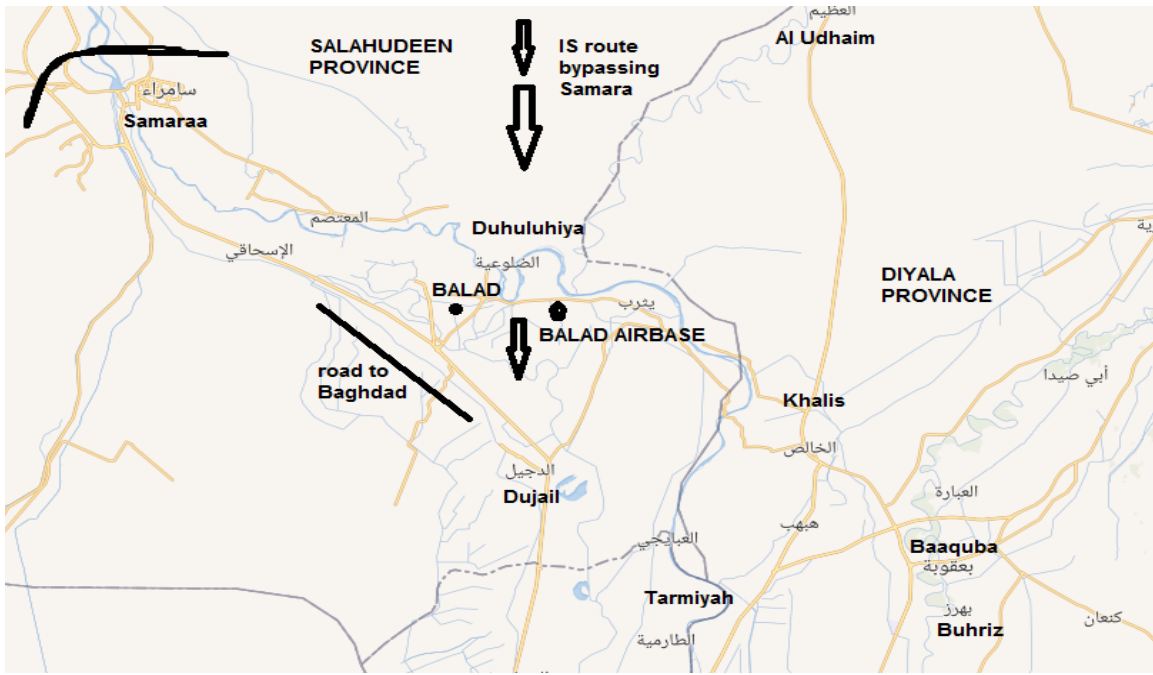
failed because of IS' lack of firepower. Due to logistical issues, the attackers did not use SVBIEDs or VBIEDs but rather motorcycles<sup>561</sup> they managed to embark in small boats while crossing the Tigris River. For that reason, the terrain was not suitable for the deployment of IS' confrontational weaponry that penetrates defence lines. The snowball effect of the disagreement of the Sunnis against Maliki that could have let IS forces march towards Baghdad stopped in this city. While the tribes in the neighbouring area of Yathrib cooperated with the group<sup>562</sup>, the two tribes in Dhuluiyah, the Albu Fajr and Juburi did not (in the next section of the study on IS' relations with tribes I explain this in depth).

A confluence of factors was behind IS' failure to take Dhuluiyah: its topography as a bottleneck, the air support received from Balad airbase, the support of PMU from Balad, the tribal resistance and refusal to negotiate, IS' impossibility to deploy SVBIEDs and the absence of a viable alternative route towards Baghdad. As a result, IS failed to take the southern part of the city connecting it with the eastern flank of the Tigris. It never threatened the main supply route between Baghdad and Samarra. It could have put the Iraqi Government and the Shia militia into a profound dilemma, to choose to defend either Baghdad or Samara. In case it had fallen into IS hands, we can suppose that the course of the conflict would have changed. Baghdad would have been put under higher pressure, and maybe the group would not have turned its eyes to grasp territories in Kurdish areas. By putting an end to IS' momentum in Salahudeen, Duluhuiya's resistance was thus a turning point in the conflict.

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<sup>561</sup>"Disobedience of the people of Balad to ISIS, the cause?", Al Alam, 7/10/2014, <https://goo.gl/ey1NTx>

<sup>562</sup> "Yatrib tribes disavow ISIS and give the name of its collaborators with the organization", Al Ghad Press, 15/06/2015, <https://goo.gl/wBStkB>



**Map showing IS' route bypassing Samarra to get the Baghdad/Samarra Highway in summer 2014**



**Map of Baiji region. Source: Institute for the Study of War**

## 7-The battle for Baiji (June 2014 – October 2015): an attrition war resulting in a final defeat and the failed Diyala offensive.

Parallel to its push south towards Northern Baghdad, IS struggled to take control over the city of Baiji and its refinery for more than a year. On June 11<sup>th</sup>, an IS convoy composed of 60 vehicles advanced towards the town of Baiji situated along the Tigris River between Zowiya and Tikrit. Located about 250 km north of Baghdad, its refinery was crucial more for Iraq's economy than IS: its facility consisted of three refineries refining 310,000 barrels a day. IS controlled the city and freed inmates from the prison on 12<sup>th</sup> June. Only the refinery resisted with hundreds of guards from the SWAT teams and Iraqi Army's 37<sup>th</sup> Brigade entrenched there and showing a fierce resistance. During the same week, IS launched 8 SVBIEDs and 200 fighters into this part of the refinery but could not break the defence of the besieged soldiers<sup>563</sup>. In the next days, a phase of negotiation began between IS fighters, local tribal chiefs and the guards supported by the Army. The siege of the refinery continued for ten days with the group avoiding taking a direct assault that could damage the infrastructure. Civilian workers inside were accorded a safe passage while the guards of the refinery still refused to go. IS' strategy was to keep the facility under siege until the troops ran out of food and ammunition. Ten days later, it was reported that 400 soldiers of the 37<sup>th</sup> Brigade, including its officers, deserted from the refinery following an agreement reached with tribal leaders according to which the troops had free passage to leave for 24 hours<sup>564</sup>. However, up to 75 police commando troops refused to surrender and received the support of the Golden Division units and became surrounded in a small compound of the refinery. IS was controlling almost all the facility and decided not to directly attack the dozens of police

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<sup>563</sup>"The complete story of Baiji refinery : from production to destruction", Al Ghad Press,28 /02/2016

<sup>564</sup> Hannah Allam and Mitchell Prothero , "75 Iraqi troops holdout in the battle for Baiji, Iraq's largest refinery", The Sydney Morning Herald, 10/07/2014, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/75-iraqi-troops-holdout-in-the-battle-for-baiji-iraqs-largest-refinery-20140711-zt2dp.html>



commandos retrenched but instead continued to starve them out. The siege of the building continued until mid-July.

At the end of the year, ISF was able to take back the city of Baiji but for a limited time, IS forces recaptured the city on 21<sup>th</sup> of December and re-established a siege on the refinery. The situation in Baiji throughout the first half of 2015 remained static, with the ISF controlling 20% of the refinery and the town while the rest of the area was either contested or under IS control. In March 2015, while Iraqi troops were redeployed to take back Tikrit from IS forces, IS forces in Baiji launched successive assaults on the refinery supported by troops coming from Syria.<sup>565</sup> The group recaptured the entire city in May 2015.

The turning point in the battle seems to have been when the US decided to allow Shia militias under the control of the Iraqi Government to join the battle. On June 7<sup>th</sup> 2015, the PMU supported by Iraqi forces captured the downtown of Baiji, including local government buildings. By 9<sup>th</sup> June, half of the city was under Iraqi Government control. By the end of July, IS controlled only the Muhandeseen neighbourhood situated in the eastern part of the city.

Despite those losses, IS' supply lines situated north and west of the city were still working. In September, it recaptured parts of the city and controlled half the refinery. However, the supply route from the west was cut by the PMU in late September. A large-scale offensive of thousands of ISF troops and Shia militias coordinated by the IRCG and supported by the coalition air force was launched in October. On 15<sup>th</sup> October they managed to capture the village of Makhoul, situated north of Baiji, marking the Iraqi Army's farthest advance north since the June 2014. They seized IS' last supply route and a day later IS was driven out from the Baiji refinery and the neighbouring town of Al Siniyah to control only 40% of the city. The last supply route the Baiji pocket had from the city of Zawiya was cut, which a few days later precipitated the fall of this pocket.

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<sup>565</sup> Abdelhak Mamoun, "Hundreds of ISIS fighters arrive on Salahuddin outskirts", Iraq News, 14/14/2015, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/hundreds-isis-fighters-arrive-salahuddin-outskirts/>

The difference between Ramadi and Baiji was the group's posture. It was an offensive one in Ramadi and a defensive one in Baiji. Although over 14 months IS managed to destroy a large number of bridges to disrupt and further isolate Ramadi, in Baiji it did not. IS' offensive in Salahudeen did not benefit from the initial work of sabotaging and cutting off ISF's supply routes. The cutting of its supply routes by ISF and the Shia militias was a determining factor in the defeat of the group and the unsuccessful defence of the city ahead of the successive counter-offensives launched by mid-2015. The other turning point in the battle of Baiji was the involvement of the Shia militias commanded by General Qassem Soleimani from June 2015, which had an impact on the balance of power in the battlefield. However, in Anbar, in 2014 and 2015 the militias were not significantly deployed because of the opposition coming from locals and the coalition.

### **Diyala failed offensive attempts**

We saw in the previous section how the situation in the areas situated north of Diyala and south of Salahudeen began to worsen for the Iraqi Government at the beginning of 2014. The events of Fallujah obliged the reassignment to Anbar of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division, which was assigned to northern Diyala as well as Tuz Khurmatu and Suleiman Beg. IS was able to operate freely and project its forces from one of its historical safe havens, the Hamrin Valley. On February 13, 2014, gunmen took positions within some villages near Suleiman Beg.<sup>566</sup> IS' attempts to grasp territory in Diyala started in Buhriz in March of 2014 when it attacked the city of Buhriz (9 km South of Baqubah). It seized the city centre on March 22, 2014, at sunset after the Maghreb prayer and relayed messages from loudspeakers in mosques calling the inhabitants to jihad using the same method as in Shura and Mosul. According to the chief of police in Diyala, cells of the group were wearing *Niqabs* to dissimulate themselves and pass through the checkpoints leading to the city centre.<sup>567</sup> These cells gathered

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<sup>566</sup> "Armed men control areas around Suleiman Beg northern Baghdad", Al Rai Media, 13/02/2014, <http://www.alraimedia.com/Home/Details?Id=86ba76e5-4ace-460f-b897-1279d6dd1091>

<sup>567</sup> "Members of ISIS entered the area of Buhriz wearing women clothes", Al Arabiya, 24/03/2014, <https://goo.gl/2cf1At>

at the old market before starting to attack the security forces. The Iraqi forces, supported by Shia militias managed to take over the city two days later on 25 March. The authorities announced the killing of 25 fighters and the formation of a new Sahawat composed of 100 citizens from Buhriz to defend the city. IS failed to take control of the city for more than two days, but it showed a capacity to pass by checkpoints using deceptive methods and mount a complex urban assault with few men.

During the June events, IS tried to take advantage of the desertions among the Iraqi Army by taking control of some villages close to Baghdad. On 12<sup>th</sup> June, it controlled parts of the small town of Udhaym, 90 km north of Baghdad, after most of the army troops left their positions and withdrew towards the nearby town of Khalis in Diyala Province. On 13<sup>th</sup> June, the Iraqi security forces retreated from other cities in the periphery of the Diyala governorate in Saadiyah and Jalula. At the same time, both IS and Kurdish forces entered the city of Jalula, which became divided between them. The group also took the area of Saadiyah.

IS tried to mount a complex urban assault on Baqubah, the capital of the province, on 16<sup>th</sup> June. Some neighbourhoods were taken during a night assault targeting the western outskirts of the city.<sup>568</sup> IS briefly overran the security forces and militias. However, these areas were regained quickly by government troops and their allied Shia militias. Around 44 Sunni prisoners were executed at a police station in Baqubah during the retreat of the security forces. As in Buhriz three months previously, the group could not maintain its presence in the urban areas it conquered. Despite the failure in Buhriz, the group tried at all costs to take a Sunni city close to Baghdad. In the case of success, it would have increased the pressure on the capital and strengthened itself with Sunni volunteers. In October 2014, the group tried to launch a direct assault on the base of the 2<sup>nd</sup> division in Muqdadidyah, but it failed<sup>569</sup>. This last episode confirmed IS' inability to shift from

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<sup>568</sup>"Iraq conflict: Clashes on approaches to Baghdad", BBC News, 17/06/2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27881995>

<sup>569</sup>"North of Dhulihya in the hands of the organisation", Al Jazeera, 5/10/2014, <https://goo.gl/Y9vfS7>

guerrilla warfare in the province to confront the Iraqi Army and the Shia militias. To grasp territory in Diyala, the group waged what was called a “Water War”<sup>570</sup>. On October 3 2014, it flooded the area of Mansourah (40km east of Baqubah) after releasing water from the Khalis River. The flood destroyed more than 750 hectares of agricultural fields and caused dozens of people to flee the area. This new method permitted the group to take back some territories it could not conquer with conventional ways.

For the particular case of Jalula, IS local commanders did not attack the Peshmerga for two months. The city remained divided between the two parts. IS local commanders were obeying a clear chain of command despite operating in a town situated far from the IS’ centres of command. This coordination was confirmed later when IS launched the offensive on Jalula in synchronicity with a widespread offensive against the Kurdish forces in Northern Iraq. Kurdish forces were anticipating an attack on Makhmur as part of IS’ run toward Baghdad by deploying their forces from Jalula to Makhmur. On August 11<sup>th</sup>, a surprise attack on the city part occupied by the Peshmerga started with the explosion of an SVBIED on their headquarters situated downtown. At the same moment, a second SVBIED using a tanker exploded in the city centre. The shock and massive explosions shattered Peshmerga’s morale while 12 checkpoints in the city were attacked by inghimassi fighters with SVESTs wearing Kurdish-style uniforms. Half of the city occupied by the Kurdish forces was taken by the group very quickly using concealment, surprise and the shock created by SVBIED explosions.

The few isolated cities taken by the group on the periphery of Diyala Province were taken back by the Iraqi Army at the end of 2014. On 25<sup>th</sup> January 2015, the leader of the Badr militia, Hadi Al Ameri, announced that the province had been liberated entirely from IS’ control, putting an end to the limited conquests of IS in the province. IS’ momentum in Salahudeen and Nineveh never occurred in Diyala. The fall of villages into its hands situated at the borders of the Salahudeen

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<sup>570</sup> “ISIS floods the area of Mansourah in Diyala and its city council urge to liberate the bridge of Dawalib”, Al Mada Press, 3/10/2014, <https://goo.gl/NLNBsm>

governorate was more related to the collapse of the Iraqi Army in Salahudeen rather than a strategy to take over territory. The closer ISF were from Baghdad the fewer desertions were observed, and in fact, there was an increased zeal of ISF and Shia militias to defend their areas.

During IS' urban assaults on cities in the north, Baghdad Province continued to launch SVBIED and SVEST attacks. However, due to the heavy security measures taken by the Iraqi authorities in the capital and its vicinity the group could not or did not want to mount urban assaults similar to the ones in Diyala. It only used indirect fire, mortars in Abu Ghraib to target the International Airport.<sup>571</sup> Perhaps it reserved its forces until the arrival of reinforcements from the offensive in the north or the west. For that reason, it never presented an imminent threat to the capital. Baghdad Province's role was also to try to disturb ISF's supply routes heading to the north by destroying bridges connecting Baghdad and its neighbouring northern provinces.

## **8-Findings and Conclusion**

To conclude this section, I present the points of convergence and divergence of IS' strategy during its urban assaults and the principles of LH's theory of the indirect approach.

### **1-Adjust your end to your means.**

This refers to starting embracing a strategy of limited aims awaiting a shift in the balance by not deploying all your power on the battlefield but instead waiting until a better situation comes. The takeover of urban areas in Anbar was preceded by a spectacular attack in the desert of Anbar that decapitated the commandment of the Iraqi Army in Anbar. The operation was carried out in order to disperse the ISF in the desert and outmanoeuvre them in the cities. With regard to IS' strategy inside Fallujah and Ramadi, the group did not attack the powerful

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<sup>571</sup> Loveday Morris, "On outskirts of Baghdad, Islamic State's advances raise tensions", Washington Post, October 16, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/on-outskirts-of-baghdad-islamic-states-advances-raise-tensions/2014/10/16/4967560e-53d4-11e4-ba4b-f6333e2c0453\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.82d59c8513c5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/on-outskirts-of-baghdad-islamic-states-advances-raise-tensions/2014/10/16/4967560e-53d4-11e4-ba4b-f6333e2c0453_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.82d59c8513c5)

Sahawat militias but rather concentrated on the security forces abhorred by most of the tribes in both cities. In order to drive out the Iraqi Government from both cities, IS' strategists could not permit themselves to attack all their foes inside both cities. Instead, they decided because of the balance of power to prioritise their fight. For IS' attack on Mosul or Jalula, the group voluntarily did not confront the Peshmerga until the balance of power was to their advantage.

The fact that IS held the initiative during 2014 indicates that the timing of their massive urban assault was not fortuitous. Indeed, the time space between the Anbar urban offensive and the Mosul offensive of 6 months caused a maximum deployment and dispersion of ISF forces. As a result, troops from the north were redeployed, and military equipment and heavy weaponry were transferred to Anbar. For the attack on Mosul, we observed that during the first assault on 6<sup>th</sup> June only 400 fighters were deployed for the initial assault. In the next days, 2000 more fighters coming from Syria and the Al Jazeera desert reinforced them for the decisive push on the western side of the city.

The attack on Kurdish areas was probably undertaken after IS' awareness of the impossibility to take Baghdad. IS attacked the Peshmerga after defeating the Iraqi army and stealing hundreds of armoured vehicles and artillery from them. It offered its army a strategic advantage to break Kurdish defensive lines easily. As a result, it was a tactical success and the Peshmerga's defences crumbled against IS' assaults. However, IS' advance was later halted by US air power intervention converting a tactical victory into a strategic mistake.

In Diyala, IS' urban assaults on Baqubah and Muqdadidiyah failed because of a miscalculated assessment of the balance of power in the province driven by a political urgency to put pressure on Baghdad. As in Buhriz three months earlier, attackers were driven out from the city and did not manage to occupy the areas they conquered for more than a day. We can presume that it was a risky bet and likely a hurried manoeuvre in order to get closer to Baghdad. As described, the resistance of the Iraqi Government and the support of powerful Shia militias meant that the balance of power in the province was never in favour of the group. It is true that the group was not deterred from launching attacks while outnumbered, but for the case of Diyala, the level of resistance and morale of the

defenders was never close to dislocation. The findings in part three of the study about Diyala Province's incapacity to launch repeated confrontational operations against ISF and Shia militias were confirmed in 2014 and 2015 by its inability to launch a successful urban assault on an urban area with permanent control of territory. The strategical shift from rural guerrilla to conventional warfare in urban areas was more precipitated by IS' political needs and their will to follow the pace of other provinces rather than a comprehensive strengthening of its capacities in Diyala. In Baghdad, the group did not try to mount a complex urban assault probably knowing the fact that the situation was even more unbalanced than in Diyala for the group there.

Finally, in Anbar, the group applied this principle by a comprehensive strategy of cutting supply lines and isolating cities before launching an urban assault. During the summer of 2014, the group worked in order to cut the city of Ramadi from the rest of Anbar and avoid the arrival of supplies by destroying bridges. On July 5<sup>th</sup>, the bridge linking Anbar to Baghdad was destroyed by an IS' cell, which resulted in the cut of the highway traffic between Baghdad and Anbar<sup>572</sup>. 10 days later another bridge, the Albu Ghraib Bridge between Ramadi and Saqlawiyah (15km north of Fallujah),<sup>573</sup> was destroyed with explosives. Another bridge was destroyed in December in the city of Shamiyah in Baghdad, west of Ramadi to prevent the supply routes from reaching the city. According to a member of Anbar Governorate, a total of 85 bridges were destroyed by IS with Anbar with IEDs and VBIEDs in 2014 and 2015<sup>574</sup>. This high number proves that a deliberate policy of systematic bridge destroying was undertaken in order to isolate cities under siege and cut the Iraqi Army's supply routes. This process of isolation as a prelude to dislocation and exploitation is in total line with Liddle Hart's vision of the indirect approach. As described by him, the indirect approach is understood by "cutting

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<sup>572</sup> "ISIS' fighters destroy a bridge in Saqlawiyah linking Baghdad and Anbar", Al Mada Press, 7/05/2014, <https://goo.gl/Pe7sSq>

<sup>573</sup> "Armed men destroy the bridge linking Ramadi and Saqlawiyah north of Fallujah", Al Mada Press, 15/07/2014, <https://goo.gl/GMpkBT>

<sup>574</sup> "Governorate Anbar: 85 bridges were destroyed by ISIS and we need 160 million dinars to rebuild them", Al Mada press, 25/10/2015, <https://goo.gl/SY4yRw>

their supply lines, dislocating their control-system, or producing paralysis by the sheer nerve-shock of deep penetration into their rear”<sup>575</sup>. The “nerve shock of deep penetration” was the use of waves of SVBIED explosions, which caused fear and broke the physical equilibrium of the entrenched enemy.

Because of its experience gained waging insurgency and terror tactics, when the group evolved into a conventional force it could use different means in order to penetrate the well-secured areas. When it failed to enter as a conventional force, it could quickly return to other tactics to achieve its goals. By definition, the group’s heteroclite experience makes it prone to adhere to this first principle. In general, I conclude that except for Diyala Province, IS’ strategists adhered to the principle of adjusting the end to your means.

## **2-Keep your object always in mind.**

This principle highlights the fact that the objective rather than the means is the most important in a military campaign. It refers to a flexibility of the mind in the selection of the means according to circumstances. During its urban assaults, the group demonstrated its possession of a whole range of means at its disposal in order to take over cities using what could be compared to a “carrot and the stick” policy:

- Through coercion such as the attacks it launched in Mosul, Ramadi, Fallujah, Tikrit and the extended use of artillery to pound well-entrenched areas. Dhuluiyah was pounded with hundreds of mortars and rockets destroying many homes. Chlorine may have been used in Saqlawiyah and Dhuluiyah, which confirms the group’s unrestricted use of weapons as theorised before by Zarqawi and legitimised by its religious mentor Abu Hassan Al-Muhajir.

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<sup>575</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, Meridian 2nd Edition 1991, p358



- By imposing a siege (Zawiya), starving out the population (Amerli), polluting its water as in Dhuluiyah, and flooding them like in Diyala Province.
- Through negotiation by brokering deals through tribal mediation with the defenders, granting safe passages for entrenched enemies (Baiji refinery) or the possibility to keep their weapons and participate in patrols (A'alam).
- Through deception, by pretending to be the rescuers of entrenched enemies making them open their gates (Saqlawiyah) or wearing the defenders' same uniforms while attacking them to increase their confusion (Jalula).

For this principle of using different means to achieve an objective, IS adhered to this principle by showing a certain degree of adaptability, flexibility and versatility in the means used in taking control of territories and subduing its enemies. IS' strategists adhered to this axiom using a wide repertoire of ways and means in order to gain greater military effectiveness and resilience against the ISF.

### **3-Choose the line (or course) of least expectation.**

The purpose of this principle is to achieve psychological surprise. The strategist needs to adopt the enemy's perspective and consider the moves he is expecting to receive. For the assaults on Mosul and Ramadi, according to government sources, authorities had previous knowledge that an imminent attack would occur. Both attacks on the cities were not "strategic surprises" per se. However, even with previous knowledge that an assault was planned, the Iraqi Government did not put in place the adequate measures in order to prepare itself to confront it. The Iraqi Army was so overstretched by an intense war in Anbar that it sent its heavy equipment there leaving the Nineveh province defenceless against IS' massive offensive.

The attack on Samarra was a real surprise given how the group quickly reached the city centre which had the reputation to be well defended. The Iraqi authorities in Northern Iraq did not interpret this attack as a diversion from something bigger but likely thought that it was the event forecasted by its intelligence services. The Peshmerga were also completely surprised by the August 2014 offensive on their

territory. They were thinking, as were the rest of the regional players, that IS would continue its push towards Baghdad.

Almost all the group's attacks were launched by night or at dawn to multiply the surprise effect on the enemy (except for Tikrit but the city was so vulnerable that surprise was not required). Mobility and rapidity also permitted IS' columns of vehicles to take the dense, high-quality road network of Iraq. Moving fast was essential in order to achieve tactical surprise over an enemy superior in number. The group also used to test the enemy's defences before an attack like in Ramadi, Suleiman Beg and Shura. It also used a range of tactics of concealment taken from its experience in urban terrorism and guerrilla tactics to surprise the enemy. Because concealment among civilians is in the group's first nature, it was able to infiltrate refugees to reach the enemy's zones (Ramadi) or even wear the same clothes as its enemy and deceive them (Jalula attack and Saqlawiyah storming). The hybrid nature of the group shows the group's flexibility while waging a conventional war to use several tactics from its guerrilla and terrorist repertoire.

The preparation of the offensives has evolved effective reconnaissance of the enemy's strength, armament, main defence positions and weak points. Using Human intelligence by infiltrating opponents forces or by the knowledge of the terrain of its local field commanders its intelligence collection process did not limit to HUMINT. It also started in 2014 to use reconnaissance drones to get vital information on the battlefield and have a decisive advantage against its opponents.

To summarise, intelligence efforts before the battle, attacks by night, speed in its movements, and the use of non-conventional modus operandi have given the possibility to the group to surprise its enemies while being outnumbered on many occasions.

#### **4-“Exploit the line of least resistance”.**

This principle is a corollary of the previous one by surprising the enemy physically. It can also require the use of the least expected routes. IS' long experience in its desert safe havens offered the group the ability to project its forces quickly and without being noticed to urban centres. Its convoys did not take regular highways but rather passed through remote areas by night without being observed by the Iraqi Army. Most of its assaults were from the desert and its routes, were very hard for its enemies to monitor without the 24h surveillance system of US intelligence satellites. These routes were: the Jazeera desert for Mosul, Thar Thar lac for Fallujah, the desert of Anbar for the cities of Anbar and Hamrin Valley for Samarra and Diyala. In addition to the mastering of routes and supply zones in the desert, the group used to bypass solid defences using alternative means of transport such as small boats to cross rivers.

Prior intelligence work may have spotted weak points in the city's defences. In Mosul, it attacked the western flank of the city and its less defended neighbourhood (Al Muthana). In Ramadi, the group first conquered areas which were always the weakest ones; it did not attack first the government complex and the powerful tribes of Albu Nimr and Albu Risha. During its attack on Salahudeen, the group continued to run towards Baghdad and bypassed cities such as in Samarra and the Baiji refinery. As described, it appears that in Diyala such a guideline was not applied perhaps as we suggested because of the urgency the group had to put pressure on Baghdad by taking urban areas in the province.

From an operational perspective, in its assaults, the group used to create a line of least resistance by concentrating on SVBIEDs in order to breach defence lines. In a sense, the group used suicide car bombs against strongly defended points, dislocating the enemy's equilibrium physically before exploiting the breach and penetrating with small concentrated units of fighters (inghimassis). In its June urban assaults, one of the reasons for IS' lightning advance, which gave the false impression of a Blitzkrieg, was its systematic bypassing of nodes of resistance. Liddle Hart and Sun Tzu considered that in war, the way was “to avoid what is

strong is to strike what is weak”.<sup>576</sup> In 1939, the Germans broke through the defences with tanks and went deep to cut the enemy’s communication lines. For IS, its lightning advance was different. The mobility of its motorized units coupled with their liberty of action offered the possibility of doing reconnaissance on enemy’s positions, feigning assault or bypassing the opponents. Using SUV convoys, they went from city to city avoiding areas of resistance while the ISF was retreating and crumbling. In order to overwhelm the enemy, the group also used the military swarming tactic by attacking simultaneously on multiple axes using SVBIEDs to saturate the enemy’s defence like in Ramadi in May 2015. As defined by it Edwards Sean it consists of a “scheme of manoeuvre that involves the convergent attack of five (or more) semiautonomous (or autonomous) units on a targeted force in some particular place”.<sup>577</sup> More precisely, for IS case study it took the shape of a dispersed swarm, where its units initially dispersed, then converged on the battlefield and attacked without ever forming a single massed army. This type of manoeuvre relies on the units’ fast mobility in a suitable terrain and a high level of synchronization between them.

Before an assault IS fighters sequenced the battlefield by ambushing the roads that can be used by support teams and by the opponent fleeing troops. They also planted mines and IEDs throughout the roads leading to their target coupled with systematic destruction of bridges to avoid being taken by surprise from its flanks. IS was prone to attack and adopt an aggressive and offensive posture by taking advantage of any weakness spotted among the enemy’s lines. In order to always maintain the pressure on the enemy even after losing its positions, IS fighters continued to harass the enemy launching counter attacks and project its inghimassi fighters whom a handful can cause massive damages. IS’ military doctrine was to avoid passivity and continuously pressure the enemy’s weak points with indirect fire, SVBIEDs or the infiltration of shock troops in order to

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<sup>576</sup> Bevin Alexander, *Sun Tzu at Gettysburg: Ancient Military Wisdom in the Modern World*, W. W. Norton & Company; First Edition, 2011, p14

<sup>577</sup> Edwards, Sean J. A., “Swarming on the Battlefield: Past, Present, and Future”, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2000. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1100.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1100.html). Also available in print form.

exhaust it. For the reasons mentioned above, I consider that this axiom has been followed by IS during its takeover of Iraqi territories.

#### **5-“Taking a line of operation, which offers alternative objectives.”**

This principle derives from the idea of putting the enemy on the “horns of a dilemma” by forcing him to disperse its forces and making him indecisive. As described above, the timing of the attack on Mosul, six months after the assaults on urban areas in Anbar, was planned to ensure a maximum overstretch and dispersion of Iraqi forces engaged against IS.

In Salahudeen, the attack on Samarra a day before the one on Mosul was purely a movement of diversion. The fact that the group did not try another complex assault on the city shows that its strategists were conscious of the extreme difficulty of breaching its defences while losing the surprise factor they had on June 5th. IS’ offensive on northeastern Iraq overwhelmingly adhered to this principle with the dilemma created for the Iraqi authorities by attacking Mosul and Samarra simultaneously. The two main cities of Northern Iraq are important in Baghdad’s eyes, one for its economic importance and the other for its religious symbolism. The resistance in both cities was completely different. While in Samarra, home of a sacred shrine, it was defended with vigour, Mosul and its population did not defend themselves, and even the reinforcements from the south did not come. IS created this dilemma but at the same time knew which city would be less defended by Iraqi Government forces and concentrated its power there.

In other assaults, we observed that the group used often synchronised attacks on several points while focusing in reality on one. The attack on Hit, in October 2014 was synchronised with attacks on the Ramadi government complex and the Centre of Command of the Iraqi Army in Anbar situated north of Ramadi. The fact that the group use highly motivated fighters ready to sacrifice themselves for the cause make feigned attacks look similar to real ones in the eye of the defenders. These “fake attacks” are the primary tool of the deceptive strategy used in order to disperse the enemy. However, the intervention of the coalition and its intelligence gathering efforts has altered the capacity of the group of successfully

mount this kind of operations which are paramount in order to disperse an enemy with more manpower and resources.

**6-“Ensuring that both plans and dispositions are flexible—adaptable to circumstances.”**

This principle means that the strategist has to be flexible and adapt its approach to each situation. It stresses the importance of planning the next phase of the war with flexible troop deployment. In a way, this principle succinctly captures the essence of the previous five; the group was proven to be responsive to its plan especially after the fall of Mosul. It was able to launch its cells and project its forces south in Salahudeen to take advantage of the collapse of the Iraqi Army. As a matter of fact, except for Kirkuk where the Peshmerga took the entire city, IS was able to react and fill the void left by ISF’s defections by projecting its relatively small forces. Its vehicle columns moved quickly from city to city and did not let other actors from the Sunni rebellion take the opportunity of filling the void of the Iraqi Army’s chaotic withdrawal. It also exploited the bounty it took to redeploy them quickly on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria.

The loss of the architect of the June 2014 offensive, Abdul Rahman al-Bilawi, a few days before the attack and its commander Abu Mohamad Al Suweidawi, the day of the final push in Ramadi in May 2015 confirmed the group’s resilience in decapitation attacks and high-level of structuration. The loss of key leaders did not cause disarray and disorder like for the Iraqi Army. The group did not postpone the planned operations and perhaps even hastened them, as for the assault on Mosul. It also shows the flexibility of the planners of the offensive in the face of unexpected events of the magnitude of the loss of its commander. Unlike the fragile Iraqi Army, for ideological reasons, the group was far from psychological dislocation even with the fatal loss of its military leaders.

For both reasons cited above, I consider that IS followed this principle in its strategy.

**7-“Do not throw your weight into a stroke whilst your opponent is on guard—whilst he is well placed to parry or evade”.**

Throughout the offensive in Iraq, IS never put all its forces in a single battle. Before launching an attack, it waited before attacking until the enemy’s capacity of resistance was degraded, like in Mosul by deploying its forces gradually there. Nevertheless, in some battle like in Ramadi or for the Baiji refinery, it tried relentlessly to take over protected areas despite how well the defenders were entrenched and the aerial support they enjoyed from coalition planes. These two strategic battles of 2015 were a turning point in the conflict for IS in Iraq and were instrumental in pushing the group to many sacrifices for political gains. It can be explained by the group’s ideology and culture of warfare, more precisely, the group’s ideological zeal in seeking martyrdom, which cannot be deterred by its numerical disadvantage. It has created a tendency among field commanders with tremendous freedom of manoeuvre to launch risky attacks on well-defended areas. We can cite the attacks in urban centres in Diyala, or the military bases of Habaniyah and Ayn Assad to describe this tendency. It can also push its political leaders to refuse to retreat as this is considered as shameful and not honourable. We can stress out the end of the year of 2014 and beginning of 2015, where emboldened by its momentum, IS military leaders may have fallen into overconfidence in their capacity like in Kobane in Syria. IS’ momentum, may have spread among its fighters and commanders the idea that providence that would grant them constant victory despite the critical change in the balance of the conflict the International coalition intervention caused. The amendment of their slogan from “*baqiya*” to “*baqiya wa tatamadad*”, meaning “endure and expand” expresses this euphoric mindset in the framework of the group’s cult for the offensive.

Indeed, the inherent Offensive nature of IS’ military doctrine was a weak point which was emphasized during the intervention of the Coalition airpower. Counter attacks launched after the loss of a position were easily spotted by the Coalition fighters and had a high cost for concentrated IS troops. Facing airpower, the group’s strategists recognized the bloodbath caused by this emboldened posture and presented countermeasures to deal with the enemy’s air campaign. In the AI

Naba newspaper<sup>578</sup>, the author recognised that it was counterproductive for the group to engage forces that enjoyed air power support. These forces only provoked IS' fighters to leave their hideouts and expose themselves to airstrikes from drones.

For the reasons cited above I consider that IS strategists did not follow this recommendation on many occasions.

**8 -“Do not renew an attack along the same line (or in the same form) after it has once failed”.**

IS' adherence to this principle can be tested in cases where its first assault failed. For the Ramadi offensive case study, we can observe that IS applied this guideline. Each of its three assaults on the city centre was different, which can make us believe that the planners of the assault likely developed a process of lesson learning to adapt their manoeuvres to evolving circumstances and the enemy's defensive posture. The first attack in January 2014 filled the void left by ISF when retreating in January and did not confront a powerful tribe. After this move, the heavily defended government complex situated in downtown became its objective. In November and December of 2014, it tried an attack with an incursion by small units with boats and by infiltrating refugees. The attack failed because of the decisive intervention of the coalition air force. In March 2015, it launched an attack using underground tunnels and SVBIEDs into strong points in the government complex. However, this time defenders were not overwhelmed by the SVBIEDs and succeeded in foiling the attack by destroying the car bombs with anti-tank missiles. The final attack carried out in May 2015, intended to downgrade the influence of the anti-tank missiles and the impact of coalition air strikes. The attackers used 30 SVBIEDs, succeeding in overwhelming the defenders and started the attack during a sandstorm to suppress air support for the ISF on the ground. The combination of both elements was vital in order to dislocate physically and psychologically the ISF entrenched in the city. The evolution in the scale and resources and different means used has shown a high

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<sup>578</sup> Naba Issue 96 and 97



level of adaptability and versatility of IS which confirms the adherence to this principle during the Ramadi battle.

### **Conclusion about the end of IS' momentum**

We can conclude that IS' strategists adhered to and applied most of the principles established by Liddle Hart for the indirect approach during their offensive on Iraqi cities. Seven of the eight principles of LH were applied by the group except for concentrated attacks on well-guarded and defended targets. For the seven other principles, empirical evidence has demonstrated the group's adherence to them, confirming a high degree of adaptability, mobility and flexibility.

From a provincial scope, Diyala Province appeared to be an exception while assessing IS' adherence to LH's strategic guidelines. The necessity to put pressure on Baghdad likely hastened IS' operations in the province. It confirms the previous assessment that unlike other provinces, in 2014 it was not prepared to shift from a rural guerrilla to an urban assault strategy. The level unpreparedness of Diyala Province may also indicate that IS was surprised by the rapid fall of the Iraqi Army in Nineveh and Salahudeen. As a result, IS failed to consolidate on this eastern front and seriously threaten Baghdad. The opportunity of taking Baghdad was politically tempting, but after failing to get a permanent foothold in Diyala and Northern Baghdad, it realised that its takeover was unrealistic. For that reason, it turned to a second objective by launching a surprise attack, ending its tacit agreement with the Kurds and internationalising the conflict.

Both the Mosul and Ramadi case studies proved to be relevant, showing that the only variable of the Iraqi Army's level of resistance was not sufficient while explaining IS' victory in both battlefields. The attack on Mosul was fast and took a couple of days while Ramadi's fall was the result of 14 months of positional attrition warfare with multiple assaults, and the intervention of US-led coalition airpower. For both cases but by using different means, the group physically and psychologically dislocated ISF's equilibrium. Regarding the reasons behind the end of IS' momentum, the first factor that emerges is foreign intervention. In

Northern Iraq and the rest of the country, from August 2014 air support provided by the US-led coalition to its allies on the ground was key to pushing back IS' forces and later taking back the cities and destroying much of their infrastructure. In Baiji, after its conquest in May 2015, the irruption of new and motivated militias coordinated by Iran in support of the Iraqi Army was decisive in order to dislocate IS' defences. However, these interventions changed the fate of the conflict later; they did not end IS' momentum but rather rolled back its gains. The first signs of the end of IS' momentum appeared before any foreign intervention in the country when the Iraqi Army was falling apart and the PMU still forming itself.

We can explain the halt of IS' expansion to endogenous and exogenous factors. As explained, the group resources were likely overstretched while conquering new territories far from its support areas and its supply lines. Also, the combination of topological factors (the dense vegetation) and the fierce resistance encountered from Sunni tribes south of Salahudeen played a significant role in halting IS' military momentum before the US coalition intervention and the involvement of Iran. Indeed tribes of Dhuluiyah or Dulaim seriously affected IS' military advance. The Jubur tribe, a Sunni tribe in the south of the town, resisted for six months stopping IS' push towards the south. Dhuluiyah was a strategic node located on the roads linking the eastern province of Diyala to Salahudeen province in the north. The resistance of the tribes there was perhaps a turning point in the conflict, which is not often pointed out while explaining the end of IS momentum in Iraq. The outcome of the battle would have been different if all Sunni tribes had adopted at best a passive posture toward the group's advance. When tribes stood up at all costs against IS, the military situation remained in a stalemate (Haditha, Dhuluiyah) despite its superiority in arms and weapons against them. For that reason, in the final part of the study I assess IS' resurgence and analyse its relations with the tribes and the Sunni insurgency from a non-military perspective in what was defined by Liddle Hart as Grand Strategy.

## VIII- Islamic State's Strategy towards competitive social structures and propaganda efforts.

Resilient organisations are those who can rebuild themselves after a shock by putting into practice a new set of routines and principles. At the worst of its situation in 2008-2010, there was an awareness among ISI's leadership about mistakes that could have been avoided. In 2008, Riyadh Al Ogeidi, a senior ISI emir, conceded, "We do not deny the difficulties we are facing now. The Americans have not defeated us, but the turnaround of the Sunnis against us made us lose a lot and suffer very painfully. We made many mistakes over the past year".<sup>579</sup> The same year, the chief of Al Qaeda in Pakistan and number three of the organisation, Atiyah Abdu Al Rahman, expressed in an internal memo that the "brothers in Iraq are making political gaffes, which give our enemies and rivals an opportunity to exploit the people".<sup>580</sup> This consciousness that errors were made is at the base of the development of a new strategy embraced by the group and applied later in Syria and Iraq to interact with other socially organised groups such as tribes or insurgent groups. The choice of groups inside the society and an analysis of their interaction with IS is not fortuitous; it corresponds to IS' mindset for its state-building project. The main way of reaching political legitimacy is by obtaining allegiances of entire groups through their representatives and not individuals. It follows the political thoughts of Ibn Taymiyah, who considers that an Islamic State has to treat with communities and not individuals and that the social contract is not between individuals and the ruler but rather between

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<sup>579</sup> Sudarsan Raghavan, "Diary of an Insurgent In Retreat", Washington Post, 10/02/2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/09/AR2008020902666.html>

<sup>580</sup> "Atiyah abdu al Rahman, letter to Mustafa abdu al yazid", Socom 2012-000011, 28/03/2007

communities and the Caliph, where the allegiance is an acceptance of domination against the granting of rights.

.In this last section of the study I analyse the influence of such a strategy on IS' relation with other social structures such as Sunni insurgent groups and the tribes in order to explain its resurgence. In the last part, I compare IS' frames towards the Sunni population in Iraq to protestors' demands during the so-called "Iraqi Spring" of 2012-2013 and verify the adherence of to the L

### *1-IS' policies with its social incubator (Sunni tribes and armed groups)*

The question of IS' influence and interaction with the Sunni society remains a field of research with more questions than answers. Reports of fights, allegiances, and declarations made by the group are available, but no deep sociological research on IS' tribal policy has been done yet. Despite this research gap, this section tries to describe IS' tribal policy from the interaction it had with tribes and the few research studies conducted in order to grasp IS' sociological and tribal roots in Iraq. Tribes in Iraq are one of the main social structures shaping identities and social bonds. They are classified based on their number of members; they can be confederations of tribes or a simple clan. The biggest structure in size is the "Kabila"<sup>581</sup> followed by the "Ashirah", the "Fakhd" clan, the "Khams", which is the extended family and the lowest structure "al Bayt" which is the family. Tribal culture and codes are still significant in society in matters of traditions such as blood feuds (*al-Tha'r*) or protecting family honour (*'Ird*). In the *Khams* structure, male members are obliged to avenge the death of another member. During its early years, IS under Zarqawi did not pay much attention to

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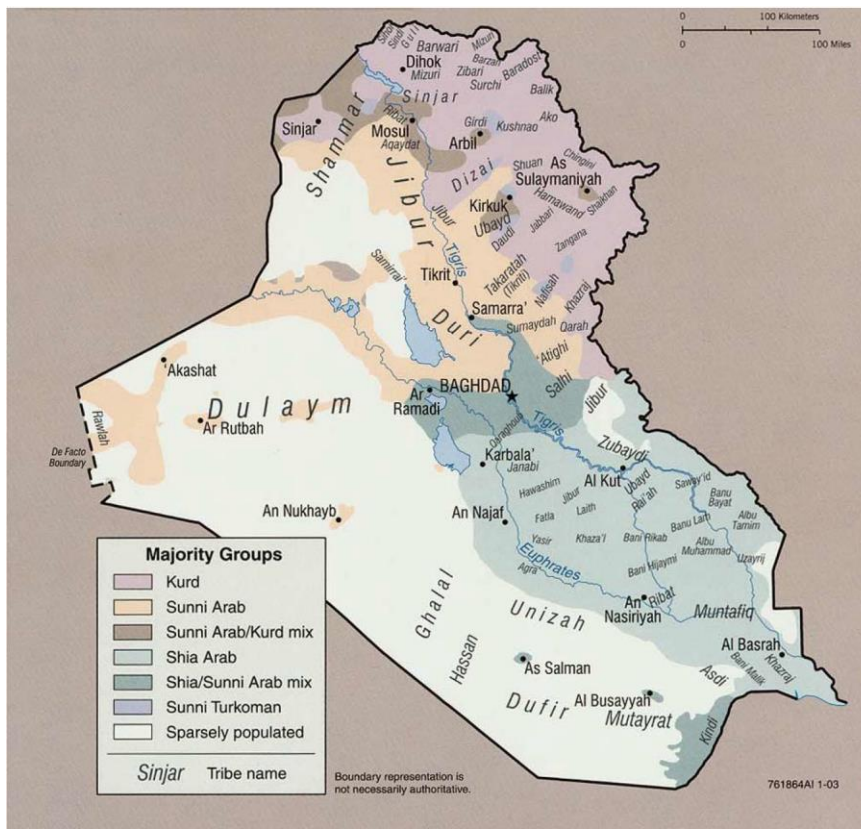
<sup>581</sup> Many Iraqis trace back their ancestry from one of the nine tribal confederations of Rubia, Zubayd, Dulaym, al-Muntafiq, Ubayd, al-Khaza'il, Bani Lam, Abu Mohammed, and the Ka'b. The largest Arab tribal confederations in Iraq are the Zubayd, Tayy, Rubia, Dulaym, Shammar, Jubur, Ubayd, Anniza, al-Dhufair, al-Muntafiq, Bani Rikab, Bani Hachim, al-Soudan, Abu Mohammed, al-Qarraghul, al-Tikriti, al-Hassan, Yazzid, Ka'b, Shammar Touga, al-Ghalal, al-Sumaida, Bani Lam, al-Azza, al-Umtayr, Zoba, Midan, al-Duriyeen, al-Khaza'il, al-Suwarma, and al-Sumaida. See

the tribes, considering them as an obsolete structure that obstructed its recruitment and had questionable moral values. No tribal chiefs had any role offered, and it did not rely on the tribal structure to control society. As explained by Whiteside back in 2009, to counter the widespread Sahawat movement Abu Omar al-Baghdadi created a tribal engagement office<sup>582</sup>. Its role was to manage and co-opt Sunni tribal figures. The continuation of this structure as part of the 2016 Islamic State caliphate confirms the importance of this structure and the new place accorded to tribes from IS' perspective.

Two tribal confederations were important in the study of IS' relations with tribes. In the last decade, the Dulaim and Jubur tribes were significant to the Iraqi power structure. They both represent two of the biggest tribes in Iraq and historically have played a major role in support of and later against Saddam Hussein's regime. The first, the Dulaim Sunni tribe, is based in Anbar governorate and is composed of the sub-tribes ('Achira) such as Abu Alwan, Abu Fahd, Abu Issa Abu Assaf, Abu Nimr, Abu Jughaf and Abu Risha. In September 2007, 20 out of the 30 tribes of Dulaim cooperated with the US and joined the Abu Risha tribe to form the Council of Awakening of Anbar (Sahawat). The second, the Jubur tribe, includes both Sunnis and Shias and is primarily centred along the Tigris River in Salahudeen and to the south of Nineveh. Its members spearheaded the Sahawat movement in Salahudeen from 2007. The posture of this particular tribe was key in stopping IS' offensive in Southern Salahudeen, in the city of Dhuluiyah. The next section explains why these two tribal confederations had an influence on IS' tribal strategy during its resurgence in Iraq in 2014.

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<sup>582</sup> Whiteside, C, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006-2017)", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague 9, 2018, p17 <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ICCT-Whiteside-Nine-Bullets-For-The-Traitors-September-2018.pdf>



**Source: "Detailed Ethnic and Religious Map of Iraq," [www.ciaonet.org](http://www.ciaonet.org)**

### **The Dulaim Confederation Tribe in Anbar**

IS predecessors' tumultuous history with tribes started in 2005 when the first dispute with the Albu Mahal tribe erupted on the Syrian-Iraqi border of Anbar province. This tribe has been traditionally linked with smuggling activity, which became threatened by AQI's networks. The beheading of police officers from the tribe triggered a revolt against the group. This episode symbolises the two major points of discordance between the group and some tribes: ideology and resources. In the aftermath of the fall of the Iraqi state, one of the few social structures which remained stable was the tribe. The control of resources coming from smuggling activities has been a major source of income for them; they also have a sense of tribal bonds and solidarity which can surpass all other identities. The *Wala* and *Baraa* ideology obliges the group to put religion above tribal bonds at the expense of sectarian and ideological identity. In addition to that, tribes had a financial incentive to see their sons join local security forces and avoid seeing Shia troops stationed in their areas. For both reasons, the killing of local police

officers from the tribes was unequivocally a catalyst event to driving a war between AQI and the tribes. In September of 2006, the Anbar Salvation Council was put in place to uproot the ISI by a tribal leader called Abu Risha, with the logistical and financial support of the US. This experience was later applied in Diyala and Salahudeen. At its creation, ISI presumed the attachment of the tribes to its project. From their creation, the Sahawat were targeted by the group, specifically their leaders (targeting strategy). The group's communication labelled them as collaborators and worshippers of the dollar to justify their targeting. From 2009, according to the count made by Whiteside from media reports, 1,345 Sahawat members across Iraq were killed.<sup>583</sup> The other response to the creation of the Sahawat was the inclusion of tribes in ISI. On 12 October 2006, Majliss Shura Mujahedeen united with three smaller groups and six Sunni tribes to form the Islamic State. The six tribes had upwards of 300,000 members, but there were existing divisions within the tribes supporting ISI. The identification of the tribes exposed their loyalties and made them direct targets for the US and the other tribes.<sup>584</sup>

During the attack on Ramadi in January 2014, a state of division and disarray prevailed among the tribes. At that moment, they were confronting the army when the IS attacked the city and were again divided in their response. In 2012-2014, the Sunni tribes of Iraq were divided between several postures towards the government and the IS. Thirty-seven tribal figures announced their condemnation of the Sahawat tribes still supporting Al Maliki. The only tribes of the Dulaim which were "neutral" were the Albu 'Assaf and Albu Mar'i<sup>585</sup>. The Albu Faraj tribe was an exception since part of it opposed IS while the other joined it. Its leaders issued a "public announcement of hostility against any tribe or group fighting IS and

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<sup>583</sup> Craig Whiteside, "War, interrupted, part I: The roots of the jihadist resurgence in Iraq", 5/11/2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/11/war-interrupted-part-i-the-roots-of-the-jihadist-resurgence-in-iraq/>

<sup>584</sup> Bill Rogio, "Al Qaeda's Grand Coalition in Anbar, Long War journal", 12/10/2006, [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/10/alqaedas\\_grand\\_coali.php#](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/10/alqaedas_grand_coali.php#)

<sup>585</sup> Al Mada newspaper issue of 29 November 2015.

supporting the government.”<sup>586</sup> The Albu Fahd tribe joined the Anbar Salvation Council and vowed to fight Al Qaeda in Iraq back in 2007.<sup>587</sup> Other tribes, which were not part of the Sahawat movement and were hostile to the government, joined the group such as the Jumeilat, the Meshhadeh tribe in Fallujah, the Halabsa and the Albu Issa and Al Janabat.

These de facto allies, despite their ideological differences, cooperated with IS against a common enemy. IS’ relationship with the tribes was always delicate and susceptible to disruption. Even in the early days of IS’ push into Iraq, some tribal leaders publicly stated that their alliance with IS was temporary and could be reversed if changes occurred in Baghdad. For instance, Ali Hatem al-Suleiman expressed this idea by saying that “When we get rid of the government, we will be in charge of the security file in the regions, and then our objective will be to expel terrorism, the terrorism of the government and that of IS”<sup>588</sup>.

Nevertheless, despite its tensions with Baghdad, the core of the Sahawat movement continued to fight against IS. The Jaghafiya in Haditha chosen to fight until death against the group. The tribe was accused of fighting other tribesmen and becoming the chiefs of the city arresting other tribes by accusing them of collaborating with IS<sup>589</sup>. On 23<sup>rd</sup> June of 2015, the group proposed the last chance for the tribe to repent by the voice of Adnani, who from a position of force called the Jaghafiya to surrender without exception.<sup>590</sup> In Ramadi, the Albu Risha, Albu

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<sup>586</sup> “Rivalry and tribal Division in Tikrit”, Niqash, Ghazwan Hassan Al Jabouri, 22/10/2015, <http://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/security/5138/>

<sup>587</sup> Erin Banco, “Sunni Tribesmen Helped ISIS Take Control Of Ramadi, Leaders Say” , Ib Time ,22/05/2015,<http://www.ibtimes.com/sunni-tribesmen-helped-isis-take-control-ramadi-leaders-say-1934441>

<sup>588</sup> Richard Spencer and Carol Malouf, “We will stand by Isis until Maliki steps down, says leader of Iraq’s biggest tribe”, The Telegraph, 29/06/2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10934438/We-will-stand-by-Isis-until-Maliki-steps-down-says-leader-of-Iraqs-biggest-tribe.html>

<sup>589</sup> “Rivalry in the city of Haditha after killings and arrests perpetrated by Sahawat of Jaghafiya”, AL Quds newspaper, 7/12/2015, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=446979>

<sup>590</sup> al-Furqān Media presents a new audio message from the Islamic State’s Shaykh Abū Muḥammad al ‘Adnānī al-Shāmī: “Oh Our People, Respond to the Messenger of God”, on June



Tiyeb and Abu A'etha tribes sided with the army against IS. The division between Baghdad and the Sahawat in Anbar did not prevent IS' commanders from continuing targeting tribal leaders opposed to them. In June 2014, the nephew of Abu Risha and a leader of the Sahawat in Ramadi, Mohamed Khamis Abu Risha, was killed with four Iraqi commanders in a triple suicide operation in the centre of Ramadi. The operation was sophisticatedly planned by IS; it managed to infiltrate the army's security ring with two of its members. They blew themselves up pretending to be bodyguards of the chief of the Sahawat Council in Ramadi. A few months later, in Abu Risha's village, General Ahmad Sadak al Dulaymi, Anbar's police chief, was targeted and killed with two IEDs<sup>591</sup>. The leader of the new Sahawat<sup>592</sup> later accused the former leader of the Sahawat, Abu Risha Mohamad, to have facilitated IS' incursion in Ramadi. Whether those accusations were true or false, it proves the high level of suspicion and mistrust between members of the Sahawat fighting IS and the Iraqi security apparatus at that time. Mohamed Abu Risha, who was no longer the leader of the Sahawat Council, was later accused of supporting terrorism by the Iraqi authorities with a warrant issued against him in April 2016.<sup>593</sup>The same day, Baghdad pronounced the death penalty for the MPs arrested in December 2013, among them Sahawat leaders from Ramadi still fighting the group. At the same time, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced<sup>594</sup> a general amnesty for the tribes and local security forces who had

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23, 2015 available <https://jihadology.net/2015/06/23/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-oh-our-people-respond-to-the-messenger-of-god/>

<sup>591</sup>Billy Rogio, "The Islamic State assassinates Anbar Province chief", The long War Journal, 12/10/2014, [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/10/islamic\\_state\\_assass.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/10/islamic_state_assass.php)

<sup>592</sup>"Al Hardan : the entry of ISIS in Al Anbar was the result of the between security forces and Ahmed Abu Risha", Al Iraq news, 30/09/2014, <https://goo.gl/6oCCcM>

<sup>593</sup>"Document issued an arrest warrant against Ahmed Abu Risha, according to Article 4 of terrorism", Baghdad balances News, 23/10/2016, <https://goo.gl/iL2bB8>

<sup>594</sup> Al-Furqān Media presents a new audio message from the Islamic State's Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ḥussaynī al-Qurayshī al-Baghdādī: "Go Forth, Whether Light or Heavy", Jihadology, 14/05/2015, English translation URL: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/shaykh-abc5ab-bakr-al-e1b8a5ussaync4ab-al-qurayshc4ab-al-baghdhc481dc4ab-22go-forth-whether-light-or-heavy22-en.pdf> . "We direct a renewed call towards those who remained in the ranks of the Rāfidah and the Crusaders in the army, police, and Sahwah so that they repent to Allah and abandon their

surrendered in Ramadi. Otherwise, they would face massive annihilation such as the Albu Fahd in Hit who suffered the execution of around hundreds of its members in October 2014<sup>595</sup>. However, the fact that the ones who executed them were members of the same tribe shows IS' awareness of Iraq's tribal codes. By killing members of a tribe by their fellow tribesmen, it avoids a revenge cycle of violence and breaks the tribe itself.

When in 2013 leaders of Sahawat who were members of insurgent groups began to be arrested on charges of terrorism, the project of the Sahawat as the Sunni local shield against the IS utterly collapsed. Most of the Sahawat chose to hold on and wait to confront IS because they were not ready to fight and preferred to see who would be victorious in the confrontation between ISF and IS. IS took advantage of Anbar tribal leaders' political miscalculation and tensions to co-opt them and win their support. In the eye of the majority of the tribes, IS became a lesser danger than Al Maliki's policy. Facing the tribes still resistant to it, the group used the threat of massive annihilation by the hands of fellow tribesmen to make them surrender and avoid a future backlash.

### **Tribes in Salahudeen**

It is essential to distinguish between the Sahawat of Anbar and the Sahawat in Salahudeen and Diyala. The Sahawat based in Anbar merged with Iraq's security institutions from the beginning and were equipped by the Iraqi Government. They enjoyed some independence and freedom of manoeuvring. Meanwhile, the Sahawat in Diyala and Salahudeen were under the pressure of Shia militia and the suspicion of the government. From 2010, the payment of the

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support of the disbelievers against the Muslims, and so that Allah accepts their repentance and forgives them and they are thereby saved from Hellfire”

<sup>595</sup>Patrick Cockburn, “For this Iraqi tribe massacred by Isis, fear of the group's return is a constant reality”, The independent, 4/07/2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-tribe-isis-massacre-war-hit-albu-nimr-baghdad-sunni-a8431466.html>

Sahawat in mixed areas began to dry up, and the promise of integrating them into the security forces vanished; the whole system began to crumble.

Like in Anbar, Sunni tribes in Salahudeen were split between opposition, neutrality, and support of IS. Some tribes switched their sides according to the winners. As in Mosul after the fall of the city, it is said that in Baiji and Tikrit, IS used money from refining and smuggling oil to co-opt the tribes and distribute essential resources to the population for free<sup>596</sup>. Other tribes were divided internally, with some members aligned with IS and others neutral or allied with the Iraqi Government. The case of the Ubaid tribe is compelling because it symbolizes how fluid tribal and IS' relationships can be and oscillate between cooperation and advice to hostility and revenge. The tribe paid a tremendous tribute in the clashes against the Maliki government security forces. Members of tribes were killed during the Hawijah massacre making its cooperation with IS very close in the following month. According to Zeidel, the tribe advised IS' commanders to attack Baghdad, but instead, the group attacked Kurdistan Peshmerga and assassinated its prominent members<sup>597</sup>. Since then, there has been a blood feud between them.

On June 23, 2014, IS managed to take over the city of Alam (situated west of Tikrit) negotiating with its inhabitants for two weeks<sup>598</sup>. Tribal leaders and the group agreed to have the tribes hold their weapons and conduct mixed patrols with IS fighters in their zone, showing further adaptability in the ways to achieve territorial domination. Instead of attacking the area or pounding it, the group opted for a negotiated settlement to enter the city. At the same time, it used a more

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<sup>596</sup> Stephen Kalin and Phil Stewart, "Deadlock in battle for Iraq refinery casts doubts on Mosul campaign", Reuters , 25/09/2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-baiji/deadlock-in-battle-for-iraq-refinery-casts-doubts-on-mosul-campaign-idUSKCN0RO1YM20150924>

<sup>597</sup> Ronen Zeidel, "The Dawa'ish: A Collective Profile of IS Commanders", PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM Volume 11, Issue 4 , 2017,p23  
<http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/619/1220>

<sup>598</sup> "ISIS fighters agree with the people of Alam the entrance to their area with the condition of give them a local leader from Jabara clan", Al Mada Press , 23/06/2014, <https://goo.gl/UjmrTr>

brutal approach against the village of Zawiya, whose inhabitants refused to surrender. It pounded it relentlessly with mortars, destroying the village. Using this method, the Islamic State made an example of the city because its people tried to “break the rules of the Islamic State”<sup>599</sup>.

In Salahudeen, the case of the Abu Ajil and Abu Nasir tribes in Tikrit symbolises how tribal allegiances to IS are interlinked with tribal traditions and local dynamics.<sup>600</sup> Like the Abu Nasir, the case of the Juburi tribe in Dhuluiyah, which confronted IS, does not confirm the idea that all the tribes are actors simply following the wind of power for their survival and interests but rather can impose their own dynamic to the conflict. After the occupation of Tikrit by IS in June 2014, the Abu Nasir, the tribe of Saddam Hussein, was the first local tribe swearing allegiance to IS with 38 members joining it.<sup>601</sup> Later, many of its members participated in the Speicher mass execution of Shia soldiers. For historical reasons, the main rival of the Abu Nasir was the Juburi tribe. Because of their involvement in an attempted coup against Saddam in 1982 and the consequent repression they suffered, they have a long-standing hostility with the Abu Nasir<sup>602</sup>. The battle in Dhuluiyah can also be explained from the perspective of intratribal dynamics, where a tribe which had the upper hand before 2003 saw the opportunity to take the advantage from the shift of power following IS' advance against other tribes<sup>603</sup>. In Dhuluiyah, people from the Juburi tribe were known to be good collaborators with the US army and Iraqi Government. The Juburi remained powerful in Salahudeen after 2003 because it was one of the few tribes to participate in the political process while the majority of the Sunnis

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<sup>599</sup> Maggie Fick, Isra' al-Rubei'I, “Islamic State crushes and coerces on march towards Baghdad”, Reuters, 22/07/2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-islamicstate-insight/islamic-state-crushes-and-coerces-on-march-towards-baghdad-idUSKBN0FR0JU20140722>

<sup>600</sup> Ghazwan Hassan Al Jaburi, “Rivalry and tribal division in Tikrit amid being for or against ISIS”, Niqash, 22/10/2015, <http://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/security/5138/>

<sup>601</sup> ibid

<sup>602</sup> Helga Graham, “Saddam's circles of hatred”, Independent, 20/08/1995, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/saddams-circles-of-hatred-1597074.html>

<sup>603</sup> “Dhuluiyah, cemeteries and story of the martyrs”, Al Hayat, 7/05/2015, <https://goo.gl/nN5dZU>

boycotted the 2005 elections<sup>604</sup>. Back in 2009, Al Maliki had already thought to create a new Sahawat with more supportive Sunni tribes, among them the Juburi tribe<sup>605</sup>. In addition to that, the tribe have a history of self-governance and resistance to IS. The tribe suffered in the past from ISI's operations with the killing of cadets at a police centre in 2011 and the killing of its tribal leaders even before the rise of the Sahawat movement in the region.<sup>606</sup> Some members of the tribe are Shia and did not have hostility towards Iran or Shia militias unlike other tribes in Anbar. In May 2015, the mayor of Hawijah, Sabhan Khalef Ali al-Juburi, joined the PMU saying, "One day Iran was our enemy, but now Iran is helping us fight our enemy".<sup>607</sup> As a result, the tribe was not part of the widespread movement against the Iraqi PM in 2013. According to the Sunni protest social movement page<sup>608</sup>, Dhuluiyah was the city with less participation in a manifestation against Maliki in Iraq Sunni provinces. For all these reasons, unlike in Anbar IS could not take advantage of the protest movement in Dhuluiyah while its narrative of Sunnis being victimised as a community by the Shia government had little chance of finding an audience among the tribe.

As described in part IV, in a siege imposed by IS the Al Juburi and Albu Faraj tribes in Dhuluiyah resisted for more than 200 days. This area was strategic for the group since it offered a direct way into cutting the supply line between Samarra and Baghdad and connecting to the Northern belt of the capital. During

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<sup>604</sup> Robert Tollast, "The civil wars of Iraq's Sunni tribes: Fault lines within 8 Sunni Tribes and sub-tribes, 2003-2016", Iraqi thoughts, 28/03/2016, <http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2016/03/28/the-civil-wars-of-iraqs-sunni-tribes-fault-lines-within-8-sunni-tribes-and-sub-tribes-2003-2016/>

<sup>605</sup> "Al Maliki bets on Al Ashairiya to defend his influence", 1/06/2008, Al Akhbar, <https://al-akhbar.com/International/163208>

<sup>606</sup> "Suicide bomber kills dozens in Tikrit", Washington Post, 18/01/2018, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/18/AR2011011800356.html>

<sup>607</sup> "Isis in Iraq: The Sunni mayor of a captured town given 'do what we want or die' ultimatum by militants", the new independent, 22/05/2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-in-iraq-the-sunni-mayor-of-a-captured-town-given-do-what-we-want-or-die-ultimatum-by-militants-10268164.html>

<sup>608</sup> Sunni Protest movement Official Facebook Page, 22/02/2013, [https://scontent.fbcn1-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t1.09/563366\\_462133060520588\\_1581310373\\_n.jpg?\\_nc\\_cat=0&oh=b1175f2d872b4a3a72b7fa7ebf2d8f17&oe=5BF32960](https://scontent.fbcn1-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t1.09/563366_462133060520588_1581310373_n.jpg?_nc_cat=0&oh=b1175f2d872b4a3a72b7fa7ebf2d8f17&oe=5BF32960)

the negotiations, IS asked the Sahawat and local police to give up their arms and accept the same terms as in A'lam. According to IS, part of the tribe was willing to give up arms, but the other part was bribed by the government and Shia militias in Balad to continue their fight. According to locals interviewed by the pro-government press, the locals decided to resist because of the insistence from IS commanders in pledging allegiance to the group and accepting IS patrols to be stationed in their city.<sup>609</sup> IS' fighters did not respect an agreement made with the locals to stay outside the city but rather tried to seize it by force. Juburi tribesmen interpreted the IS' entrance to their land as the return of former regime elements and members linked with Saddam Hussein's tribe, the Albu Nimr.

## *2-IS' tribal policy*

Assessing IS' tribal policy is not easy since not many sources are available from the group. Another perspective for studying IS' tribal policy would be to study it from the organisation's perspective. One study<sup>610</sup> conducted by Roman Zeidel offers a collective profile of the commanders and is one of the few attempts to draw a sociological picture of the group from a tribal perspective. By collecting the names of IS commandants from primary sources and media reports, Zeidel formed a comprehensive collective profile of IS military middle and high-level leadership. Unravelling their origins may help to understand IS social structure and the level of support in tribal regions such as Anbar and Salahudeen. Zeidel's account of IS commanders shows a great tribal diversification from the group with 34 tribes represented. From Zeidel's figures, we can assume that the group does not rely on one tribe while recruiting members or promoting commanders. It still has the attractiveness to recruit members from tribes which form the column of the Sahawat such as the Jaghafiya, the Albu Fahd, and the Albu Issa. These

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<sup>609</sup> "ISIS intensifies attacks on Dhuluiyah amid a massive escape of its citizens", Al Akhbar Al Aan, 15/07/2015, <http://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/arab-world/2014/7/15/isis-increase-attacks-dhuluiya-citizens-escape>

<sup>610</sup>Ronen Zeidel, "The Dawa'ish: A Collective Profile of IS Commanders", Perspectives on Terrorism Volume 11, Issue 4, 2017, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/619/1220>

recruits from opponent tribes are essential since they can be used to eliminate their fellow tribesmen, break a tribe's cohesion, and halt any tribal revenge process. IS cannot rely on recruiting whole tribes even though the tribe of Jumaila was neutral in Fallujah and that all of IS commanders in Karma were tribesmen from Jamila.<sup>611</sup>

The release of IS internal documents from Mosul shows that a large number of Juburis served in IS' police forces in their areas<sup>612</sup>. This confirms the application of the strategic recommendation issued a few years ago of using locals to enforce Sharia law in conquered territories and appointing local leaders from the same tribal ascendance to reduce the feeling among locals that IS was exogenous to them. The biggest tribal confederation (*Kabila*) in Anbar is the Dulaim, in which most of the tribes support the government and have spearheaded the fight against the group for a decade. The Albu Bali from Ramadi is a small tribe from the Al Khalidiya region, which was one of the first to fall to IS' control in 2014. The researcher counted eleven commanders from Jumaila, eight from Albu Ali and six from Albu Issa. For the other tribes from the Dulaim confederation they only had one to three commanders from IS. In Anbar, tribal identity remains essential and the IS could not turn many members of these tribes which have a bloody history with the group that would prevail in time.

The Jabur is the other significant tribal confederation, regrouping between four and eight million people in Iraq. It is normal that many of the IS Iraqi commanders counted are Jaburis (20 members), but this does not mean the tribal confederation is aligned with the group because of the gargantuan size of the tribe. Despite the tribe's vast size and its opposition to IS, the fact that a senior

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<sup>611</sup> Ibid p27

<sup>612</sup> The manifest prize and the great harvest took place when some 70 percent of Sunni tribal chieftains in the Land of the Two Rivers hastened to join Hilf al-Mutayyabin and bless the oaths of allegiance made to the state of Islam and Muslims. Hence, I thank and hold in high esteem my brothers the tribal chieftains of Al-Dulaym, Al-Jubur, Al-Ubayd, Zawba, Qays, Azzah, Tayy, Al-Janabiyin, Al-Lihyaliyin, Al-Mashahidah, Al-Dayniyah, Bani-Zayd, Al-Mujamma, Bani-Shammar, 'Inizah, Al-Sumayda, Al-Nu'aym, Khazraj, Bani-Luhayb, Al-Bu-Hayyat, Bani-Hamdan, Al-Sa'dun, Al-Ghanim, Al -Sa'idah, Al-Ma'adid, Al-Karabilah, Al-Salman, and Al-Kubaysat.

Juburi commander, Abu Fatima al-Jaburi, was Baghdadi's deputy and governor of Iraq shows the no tribes are excluded in IS' upper echelon.

One other result of the research is that Abu Bakr Baghdadi's tribe is under-represented. It suggests that unlike Saddam Hussein's nepotism, the caliph did not promote its tribesmen. Tribal affiliation is thus not relevant in determining the structural hierarchy in the group. It confirms that the group's ideology and identity transcend traditional clan ties and surpass all the other ones. In a sense, the organisation is more modern than other rivals (militias, Iraqi state) as it does not rely on an archaic system of solidarity or alliance for promotion — the fact that all tribes are represented shows that in the Sunni tribal landscape the group is well represented. Not a single tribe is predominant in its leadership nor blacklisted for its hostility towards the group. On the other hand, the group wants to erode the prevalence of the tribal identity without wiping it. The fact that its commanders use their tribal surname by not hiding it but instead promoting it shows the acceptance of the tribal dimension of the country. Moreover, IS intended to project an image of tribal support by hosting tribal figures of Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul and publicising their allegiance. Adnani claimed that in June 2015, "The Sunni people are now behind the jihadists ... the enemies have been petrified by the daily pledges of allegiance by the chiefs of tribes to the Mujahedeen".<sup>613</sup>

Finally, the other tribal dynamic from which IS can thrive is the perpetual revenge cycle between them. When tribes or many of its members join the group, each member of the tribe become responsible for the actions of his fellow tribesmen. Since the ousting of the group from Tikrit, a revenge cycle has prevailed between tribes and individuals judged for the collective action of the whole tribe or some of its members. In Balad, the tribe of Beni saad in Yathrib, who pledged allegiance to IS, is still in conflict with other tribes because of the cooperation of their members with the group. Because of the continuation of intratribal conflicts,

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<sup>613</sup>Al-Furqan Media presents a new audio message from the Islamic State's Sheikh Abu Muhammad al 'Adnani al-Shami: "Oh Our People, Respond to the Messenger of God" <https://jihadology.net/2015/06/23/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-oh-our-people-respond-to-the-messenger-of-god/>



members of a tribe linked with IS are still considered as sympathisers of the group and therefore suffer discrimination and a form of collective punishment<sup>614</sup>. In 2016, the Salahudeen governorate decided to impose between 10 years and a life sentence of expulsion from their homes to members of IS and their families in the governorate.<sup>615</sup> This tribal social excommunication means that tribes from which members have joined IS will always be labelled as such for generations. This creates a multi-generational discrimination process, from which the group can take advantage in the future.

### *3-IS' policy towards insurgent groups during the 2014 offensive.*

The other actors the group interacted with during its resurgence are the armed groups from the Sunni insurgent landscape, in particular, with the militarization of the protests throughout the Sunni governorates of Iraq. Despite the protests being non-violent at the beginning, armed groups began to be involved. Among them, the most active, the Sunni nationalist militant movement Jaysh rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi (JRTN) led by Izzat Ibrahim Al Durri. The group is a neo-Baathist insurgent group most active in Salahudeen and Mosul. Members of this group were present in protest camps in Ramadi to call the people to take arms. The same demand was made by IS, which repeatedly called the protestors to take arms and return to violence. Leaflets were distributed to the protestors, and sometimes flags of the groups were raised. The bloody clashes in April 2013 at the Hawijah protest camps sparked a wave of violence across Sunni-majority areas of Iraq. JRTN militants clashed with security forces at Qara Tapa in Diyala Province, Suleiman Bek, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul. Tribal militias were thus formed in the following days in Anbar and Samarra. The militarization of the protests benefitted IS by using the tribes' anger against the

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<sup>614</sup> Adnan Abu Zeed, "Tribal laws determine fate of IS families in Iraq", Al Monitor, February 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/ninevah-anbar-salahuddin-iraq.html>

<sup>615</sup> "Iraq : deportation and detention for suspected "ISIS families" after a local decision", Human Right Watch, 5/03/2017, <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2017/03/05/300796>

government. Many militias lacking experience, arms and manpower had to cooperate with IS against their new common enemy, the Maliki government.

Sunni politicians were claiming that all violence in Iraq was due to Iran's manipulation of ISI in order to marginalise the Sunni and justify their repression. A vicious circle was created, where Maliki accused protestors of being infiltrated by IS, whom, in turn, accused Maliki and Iran of sponsoring IS' actions. In the face of the rise of a myriad of tribes and armed groups, the main difficulty for Maliki's forces was to distinguish protestors and their militias from IS' fighters. Knowing that the camps were continuously portrayed as staging areas for terrorism, some Sahawat leaders joined the protests, especially after they saw their wage cut by the government in Baghdad.

Other Sunni insurgent groups against the government in Baghdad had a different stance on IS. The general military council of Iraqi revolutionaries (GMCIR) was considered as the strongest among the anti-government groups in Iraq<sup>616</sup>. It appeared at the end of December 2013 during the wave of violence resulting from the crackdown of Sunni protest camps. The JRTN was the dominant leading force inside the council with other smaller groups such as the "1920 brigades". After the fall of Mosul, the leader of JRTN, Izzat al-Duri, did not show hostility towards ISIS and described Al Qaeda and the Islamic State fighters who liberated the city as "heroes and knights"<sup>617</sup>. He also praised nationalists and Islamists and called them to unite in order to break the "Safavid cancer" and occupation. Aware of the equilibrium of power, this positive mention of IS oriented its fighters in order to minimise the conflicts and protect its group's members. The GMCIR claimed that "revolutionaries" had seized the western side of Mosul during the June fall of the city and that it had played an essential part in the conquest of the city. Those claims were very doubtful given the fact that IS fighters imposed their agenda on the city so quickly (imposing rules, destroying shrines, arresting former

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<sup>616</sup> Ibid

<sup>617</sup> "Speech of the Muhib Rukun, Izzat Ibrahim Al Duri July 2014", 12 July 2014 min 4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zbJfreEEbQ>

Baathists). A few years later, it was clear that IS was the leading force capable of conquering the city and the only exerting its control over it.

Other leaders from the myriad of Sunni armed groups have tried to depict IS' actions as part of the revolution in order to take credit from the situation. Leaders such as Abdul-Sammad al-Ghraiiri considered that IS "accomplished goals and helped the revolutionaries achieve their goals and we are semi-[parallel] with them in facing the Iranian Safavid project in Iraq".<sup>618</sup> Similar to JRTN, the Islamic Army (Sunni resistance group linked to Muslim Brotherhood willing to participate in the political process) demonstrated the same rhetoric towards IS' advance by minimising its role in the collapse of the Iraqi state. They denied their relationship with the group while at the same time acknowledging its role to protect its members and show a popular among the Sunni population anti-government posture. As described in the report on Sunni insurgency, their positive labelling of the IS' conquest may also have intended to prevent any potential retaliatory measures against its members. Hashim also explained their non-clear stance towards IS' advance as a political manoeuvre in order to gain time waiting for the support from the intelligence services from regional actors<sup>619</sup>.

In Fallujah, the IS had to deal with the Fallujah Military Council as the umbrella for the tribal and insurgent groups opposed to the government. The council was influenced by Abdullah al-Janabi, a Salafist figure who participated in the battle of 2004 alongside AQI. He coordinated the different armed groups inside the city in January 2014. Nonetheless, his role is said to have diminished at the profit of IS in 2014. As explained in the strategic assessment of IS' conquest of Fallujah (part V), the balance of power inside the city was so in favour of IS that other armed groups relied on its enhanced military capabilities to defend the city. Its greater military capacity pushed other groups to accept its domination in order to prevent the Iraqi Army from entering the city. In April 2014, the Fallujah Military

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<sup>618</sup> Sinan Adnan and Aaron Reese, "Iraq's Sunni insurgency", Middle east security report 24, October 2014, p34  
<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Sunni%20Insurgency%20in%20Iraq.pdf>

<sup>619</sup> Hashim S Ahmed, *The Caliphate at war*, Hurst London company, 2017, p285

Council denounced the assault, torture and kidnapping cases by IS after the refusal of its members to pledge allegiance to the group<sup>620</sup>. Initial cooperation with other groups and their further marginalisation when the group's military capacities outweighed them was IS' trademark in its relation to smaller armed groups having a different ideology. For that reason, groups against the government and the traditional Sunni insurgent groups positively labelled IS' moves. At the tactical level, they had had some degree of cooperation while their strategic goals were the opposite. Indeed, while Sunni insurgent groups were calling to launch the final attack on Baghdad after the fall of Mosul, IS' actions proved that the group had its own agenda. By attacking the Peshmerga in August 2014 and the Yazidi community in Northern Iraq, IS' commanders decided for several reasons to internationalise the conflict. This move, as well as the treatment of Mosul's Christian community, was widely criticised by revolutionaries and the Sunni insurgent groups. Both episodes show that there was no strategic cooperation or even concertation between IS and other insurgent groups. As a matter of fact, beyond expelling the Iraqi security forces from the areas they sought to control, GMCIR's operational goal was completely different from IS' goal.

The relation of tactical cooperation between both groups was shaped by the balance of power between them and the shared priority of combating a common enemy. However, heavy fights erupted on June 22, 2014, after IS ordered other armed groups in Hawijah to surrender their weapons and pledge allegiance<sup>621</sup>. In Mosul in July 2014, dozens of ex-Iraqi Army military officers and figures of the Ba'ath Party were arrested by the group, questioned and perhaps executed. In areas where JRTN had a substantial presence, IS worked to diminish it by displaying its power in the streets and banning the displaying of photos of Al Durri,

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<sup>620</sup> "ISIS kills leaders in armed groups for refusing to pledge allegiance during a meeting in Fallujah", Sumaria News, 8/07/ 2014, <https://goo.gl/JV7tRu>

<sup>621</sup> "Iraq: 17 killed in the clashes between "the Islamic State" and the extreme Naqshbandi group", France 24, June 22, 2014, <https://goo.gl/UoJkB7>

Saddam and the Iraqi Baathist flag<sup>622</sup>. In Diyala Province, clashes occurred with the Islamic Army with the execution of 10 leaders in Sadia. In July 2014, a meeting of several JRTN leaders was targeted by an IED<sup>623</sup>. In order to contain IS, JRTN started cooperating with Sunni tribes linked with the government. In September 2014, JRTN supported Sunni tribes<sup>624</sup> as they fought IS in the Iraqi Arab neighbourhoods of Wihda and Tajnid of southern Jalula.

Whether the JRTN, the Islamic Army or Sunni tribes, they share a history of conflict and an irreconcilable ideological rift with the IS and its predecessors. Because of their nationalist orientation, they are considered as apostates in IS' religious canon. However, in a state of inferiority the group has shown a high degree of pragmatism and awareness of its strategical environment by following Sun Tzu's advice of "first attack the enemy's strategy, then his alliance, next to his army and last his cities."<sup>625</sup> In 2006, the strategy of the US and next, the Iraqi Army was to isolate IS and its predecessors from their social incubators and put the organisation in a constant state of war against other Sunni groups. The new strategic environment in the post-US-withdrawal Iraq put an end to the group's isolation. First, with the rise of sectarianism, the Maliki government overpassed IS as the main enemy for many Sunni actors. The more Maliki alienated the Sunnis, the more their posture was at best neutral towards IS. For example, in the hub that constitutes the desert between Syria and Iraq in Nineveh, tribes in the Al Jazeera desert stopped their cooperation with the Iraqi military against IS because of their provocative attitude<sup>626</sup>.

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<sup>622</sup> "Daech is worried about the competition of other Sunni groups and the Sharia court is the destiny of its opponents", Al Mada press , 27/07/2014, <https://goo.gl/y4syNa>

<sup>623</sup> "Killing and wounding of 7 Naqshbandi Army commanders north east of Baquba", Al Sumaria News, 10/07/2014 , <https://goo.gl/YxsyFj>

<sup>624</sup> "More than 20 killed and injured in clashes between tribal gunmen supported by JRTN and ISIS in Jalula", Shafaaq, 02/09/2014, <http://www.shafaaq.com/sh2/index.php/news/iraq-news/82644---20-----html>

<sup>625</sup> Sun Tzu, translation Griffith, *The Art of War*, Oxford, 1963, p 77-78.

<sup>626</sup> "Sources : the border with Syria became a fertile ground for Al Qaeda and tribes have boycotted the Security forces for their provocative behaviour", Al Mada, 26/10/2013, <https://goo.gl/hn3Vmf>

IS' pragmatism towards other groups pushed the group to concentrate its fight in Iraq on government forces and their allies while from January 2014 in Syria it launched an all-out war against Syrian rebels. It is important to note that in both theatres of operation the group developed a different strategy. Because it had the upper hand in Syria and feeling the rising hostility of rebel groups supported by Arab and Western intelligence, it ended its cooperation with them and then while in Iraq it started to cooperate with insurgent groups. A tactical reason was the growth of the international involvement in the Syrian Civil War and especially the question of rebel's support from Western powers, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which had torn apart the rebellion. This prompted a reaction from the group, which anticipated that the flow of weapons destined to rebels would be used against it. Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq did not have such international backing that would orientate their military operations and thus concentrated their fight only on the Iraqi Government.

The group had an awareness of its strategical environment and adapted its level of cooperation with insurgents in different political landscapes. In Syria, it was already in the midst of a territorial strategy of state-building while in Iraq it was still involved in guerrilla strategy. The group's doctrinarian obsession of ideological purity did not make it impossible for the group to adopt strategic postures of neutrality, alliance or open hostility against these armed groups. It did not yet adopt an all-out war policy based on a Manichean vision of the world. Indeed, IS' ideology considers that all other political entities are "*tawaghit*" and therefore they are illegitimate and must be fought. However, from its relations with tribes or armed groups, we can conclude that there was a kind of strategical realisation from its leadership to prioritise the fighting depending on the context, the group's strength, and its strategic objectives.

As a result, open confrontation never took place before the caliphate's declaration of July 2014. However, clashes localised in space and time erupted after IS' takeover of large parts of Iraqi territory. Even before the proclamation of the caliphate, IS was imagining itself as a state that would never have to lower its statutes and negotiate or be judged as equal as militias or armed groups. Since the proclamation of the caliphate, it has urged all the armed groups to pledge

their allegiance in the name of *Wala wal Bara*. Because it elevated its status to a “caliphate”, IS has implicitly proclaimed itself as the sole holder of legitimate violence in the Islamic world. Since 2014, it has an obligation of reuniting the Islamic *Ummah* under one banner. Consequently, no groups, no militias or any other entity should be tolerated. This strategic consequence of the ideological evolution explains the future conflictive nature of its relations with all other armed groups from the Islamist political spectrum around the world.

#### **4-IS’ frames and the Sunni 2012-2013 protests**

This part sheds light on the issue of IS’ rise and popular support it enjoyed in the context of the protests of Sunni Iraqis in 2012 and 2013. We observed how these protests, which started peacefully, certainly helped IS’ resurgence by dispersing the Iraqi Army and turning many tribes from fighting IS to fighting the Iraqi Government. Facing this events, the group had its Grand Strategy (see part A of section III), which goes beyond its military actions and focuses on its ability to generate support among the Sunni population in Iraq. The group labelled popular support (*Hadina shaa’biya*) as a *Taghut* in the case it delays the full application of sharia<sup>627</sup>. However, from the 2010 strategic document it proved to be aware of the necessity of forming a constituency inside the Sunni population. Its strategy for gaining support is not based on a pragmatic gradualist approach but rather on the thriving on the sentiments of humiliation, the show of its moral superiority and the rise of sectarianism as the main identity shaping political allegiances and solidarities.

This part assesses the group’s ability to spread frames that resonate among its targeted audience in order to enjoy a critical mass of popular support. Framing is a form by which actors in a social movement diffuse ideas and discourse that resonate among those they intend to mobilise. The theory argues that frames are articulated to resonate with the grievances of the Iraqi Sunni population. When there is frame alignment, recruitment and mobilisation are possible. The objective

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<sup>627</sup> Naba Newsletter issue 121 available at <https://jihadology.net/2018/03/01/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-121/>

of this last section is to determine the coincidences between IS' discourse towards the Sunni population and its demands that were widely voiced during the 2012-2013 protests. This part of the study is articulated to verify if the group purposely voiced demands and grievances shared by a large part of the Sunni population which were not part of IS' support base. It will be an opportunity not to focus on the ideological or religious frames the group is famous for diffusing but rather emphasise the social and political dimension of its discourse. I selected the major IS videos centred on Iraq released in the years preceding the protests to identify its main socio-political frames. From the video material released by IS, I show how the group had identified the grievances of the Sunni population in Iraq by spreading them before the start of the protests. In the second part, I compare those frames with the bulk of the protestors' demands presented a few years later. A sample of six major video productions released between 2010 and 2014 was selected. Al Furqan is one of the media wings for the Islamic State and its prior incarnations and represents its oldest and most influential media production in Arabic.

- “*Khawanatu Al Assuna*” (Lit the traitors of the Sunni) released in 2010 by the Islamic State of the Iraq Ministry of Information<sup>628</sup>.
- “*Saleel al-Sawarim*” ( Lit The Clanking of the Swords); four episodes were made available by Al Furqan Media Production in July 2012, August 2012, 2013 and May 2014 <sup>629</sup>.
- “*Khams A'wam Aala ikamat Adawla*” (Lit Five years after the establishment of the state) released in 2011 produced by Al Furqan Media Production<sup>630</sup>.

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<sup>628</sup> Lit “The traitors of the Sunni”, a video issued by the Islamic State's Minister of Information, available on the following link; <https://archive.org/details/Koonah>

<sup>629</sup> Lit “The Clanking of the Swords”, al-Furqan Media presents a new video message from the Islamic State of Iraq: “Clanking of the Swords available on the following link [https://archive.org/details/abohafsaalkaisy\\_gmail\\_HD4](https://archive.org/details/abohafsaalkaisy_gmail_HD4) and <https://jihadology.net/2012/08/16/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-clanking-of-the-swords-part-2%E2%80%B3/>

<sup>630</sup> Lit “Five years after the establishment of the State”, a video issued by the Islamic State's Al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, available on the following link : [https://archive.org/details/osod\\_hhgg21](https://archive.org/details/osod_hhgg21)



### **Khawanatu Al Assuna” (Lit the traitors of the Sunni)**

The first video entitled “*Khawanatu Assuna*”; the “traitors of the Sunni community” was published in May 2010 by the Ministry of Information of the ISI. It starts with a statement about the decline of the Islamic Ummah by making a historical parallel between the fall of Baghdad to the Americans in 2003 and its takeover by the Mongols during the thirteenth century. According to the narrator, the fall of the Abbasside capital was possible because of “Shia’s community felony”. Similarly, the “US crusaders” relied in 2003 on the Shia and the traitors among the Sunna community to take the city. The video’s primary purpose is to show Shia’s responsibility and role in harming the rights of the Sunni community.

The narrator first denounces “*Majliss Al Hukm*”, “the council of power” of the political parties that represent the Sunni community in the political process of the newly established Iraqi state. The *Hizb Al Islami* is the main Muslim Brotherhood-oriented party and the principal target of this video. Other groups are highlighted such as the coalition formed by Sunni Arab parties such as the Islamic party, the dialogue party, the colloquium party (*Hizb al mou’atamar*), and political representatives of the Islamic Army, the main Sunni nationalist insurgent group during the US occupation. The narrator considers that these parties and coalitions are a “façade” where the means justify the end. The first frame of the video is that representatives of the Sunni in the Iraqi state are corrupt politicians running for their private interests at the expense of the Sunni’s general interest. The second frame presented in this part is that the Sunni elite is not only corrupt but remains in the hands of the Shia government. Their acceptance of having only the head of the parliament and not the government or the presidency is depicted as a confirmation of their status as puppets of the Shia government in Baghdad.

Splits inside the Sunni bloc are proof of the prevalence of personal interests over the Sunni general interests. Parties who have chosen political inclusion in the political process have failed to defend the Sunni and be their shield. They are not the political resistance as they like to portray themselves but traitors and puppets of the government in Baghdad. The exemplum cited is the one of Machhadani, who joined the Dawaa’ party of President Al Maliki to be nominated as the president of the parliament and was later deposed by Shia and Kurdish blocks

thanks to the Islamic party's vote at the parliament. Another example cited is the quarrel between the Islamic Army's political wing and the Islamic party for money and seats. The narrator reduces Sunni politics to a fight for personal interests symbolised by the political disagreements of politicians spending most of their time in the hotels of Amman and Damascus.

The next important frame presented is about Sunnis' humiliation in the post-2003 era. Despite the Sunni political elite's claims of joining the political process in order to defend Sunni rights and improve their situation, the population only received discrimination and humiliation in return. Sunni women's mistreatment in prison symbolises this humiliation. The narrator cites the example of A'adamiyah, Mosul, Diyala and Abu Ghraib prisons, where cases of rape were registered with the knowledge of powerless Sunni politicians. The other expression of this collective humiliation is the fate of Sunni men arrested without proof. Again, Sunni politicians are presented as powerless against the abusive arrest campaigns of the ISF with the accusations of widespread torture. Even the general amnesty project presented by the government in Baghdad to free innocent people was designed according to the narrator as a way to free "the better treated Shia militia fighters" from prison. The reality is that Sunnis are jailed in their dozens on a daily basis while their families have to pay ransoms in order to release them to avoid their extra judiciary execution. As an echo of these claims, many reports have emerged confirming the widespread cases of prisoners' mistreatment by Iraqi prison authorities<sup>631</sup>. The security deal in the final part of the video refers to the Iraqi Government's agreement with foreign companies regarding the exploitation of the country's natural resources. According to the commentator, it constituted "a political and economic crime against Iraq" and a green light accorded to foreigners and neo-colonialist groups to exploit the country's wealth. The bottom line is that the country's independence is an illusion. Since 2003, it has been destined to remain occupied and under the "protection" of foreign countries.

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<sup>631</sup>"MP from Iraqiya confirms mistreatment of prisoners in Taji prison and asks the Prime minister to intervene", Al Mada Press , 30/01/2013, <https://goo.gl/99hxnA>

From this first video, three main socio-political frames are worth to be underlined:

- The Sunni political elite is corrupt and maintains the illusion of power for the Sunni community.
- The Sunni political elite is weak and powerless to protect the Sunni community from humiliation.
- Independence from the US and Iran is another illusion shared by the Sunni political class.

**Khams A'wam Aala ikamat Adawla" (Lit Five years after the establishment of the State).**

The next video entitled *Khams Aa'wam A'ala ikamat Adawla"* (Lit Five years after the establishment of the State) was released by the end of 2011 by Al Furqan Media Production. It was produced to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006. Here, the principle frame is to present the group as the shield of the Sunni community in opposition to the Sahawat who are depicted as the shield of the Iraqi Government. The video starts with the interview of an IS Iraqi ground commander. First, he tries to counter the accusations repeated by the media against the group of spilling the blood of the Sunni. He denies this accusation with the narration of an episode involving Emirati tourists with no links with the ruling family being spared and freed after being caught with Sahawat leaders. Footage of aborted IED operations of the group in Diyala was also presented to show the group's restraint in not killing Sunni civilians used as human shields by the Iraqi Army. At the 10<sup>th</sup> minute, there is footage of ISI's fighters patrolling by night in the street and warning civilians not to approach any army checkpoints in order to be safe. A fighter expressly tells them while parading by night at the 14<sup>th</sup> minute: "We are your shield with Allah's will".

The recurrent theme of women's brutalisation is again exposed at the 41<sup>st</sup> minute, where the narrator disapproves the arrest campaign by the security forces targeting women as a response to terrorist attacks in Baghdad. To illustrate this, the video makers used an interview of an Iraqi civilian claiming that the forces under the direct authority of Al Maliki threatened him with the rape of his sisters.

Another former inmate is shown claiming that they threatened to rape his wife unless he pleaded guilty for a crime he was accused of. Those interviews were taken from Sunni Arab channels close to the Islamic Party known for its hostility towards Al Maliki. The interviewed member of ISI commented on this footage with the following statement: “the i’rd of the human is a red line especially if this person is a Muslim. We need to defend i’rd by taking revenge and punishing the criminals. What is the responsibility of the women and children if his son, husband or brother take arms? Women are not responsible for their husbands’, sons’ or brothers’ acts because they do not have authority over them. These apostates have women and children, but the Mujahedeen do not target them on purpose even though they are easier to spot. These people do not have values”.

Another piece of footage is a mix of interviews of diverse women narrating how the security forces arrested and brutalised them. The spectator can see a mother showing her young girl crying after being taken by the security forces while another mother narrates how they forced her girl through forced confessions to admit her adherence to Al Qaeda. At the bottom of the screen, is the writing says, “There is no good in us if we do not avenge them” while a sad nasheed dedicated to imprisoned women is played in the background. The speaker later connects the situation of these women to the military operations of the group and warns the enemy that *“as long as women will be jailed all the doors of jihad and war will be opened and that our blood is cheap for their liberation”*. A fighter of the group is shown at the 45<sup>th</sup> minute holding a gun and portrayed as Abu Mujaheed Al Shami and calling for revenge for his imprisoned sisters: *“Oh my sister you have brothers who don’t sleep and don’t accept this situation. Our bodies will be slain, and our blood spilt in the path of defending your honour and avenging you”*. At the end of the video, a fighter appeared at the 48<sup>th</sup> minute called Abu Osama Al Shami from Syria urging the Syrian people not to protest for democracy, freedom or socialism but instead for Islam. Also, even before the apparition of Jabhat Al Nusra in 2012, he announced the arrival of ISI brigades in Syria and the strongholds of Bashar Al Assad.

### **Saleel Al Sawareem” (The Clanking of the Swords),**

A few months later, Al Furqan Media Production released the first episode of the series “*Saleel Al Sawareem*” (The Clanking of the Swords), which shows a diverse range of violent operations and frames that the group want to carry out to its audience. The first part of the video is almost entirely dedicated to convincing and attracting the Sunni population. First, the *Sahawats* are depicted to be weak being placed after the US withdrawal in a situation between “the hammer of the ISI and the nail of the Iraqi Government”. Meaning, without US support they are a prey for the group’s targeted killing campaign and Iraqi Government and Shia militia’s provocations. For the narrator, the US has retreated and left them at the mercy of a government led by Shia sectarian political powers. Sunnis were used by the government as a shield to fight other Sunnis before being discharged by them. The most symbolic case cited is the one of the president of Parliament, Tariq Al Hashmi, depicted as someone who was deceived after being presented as the symbol of the successful Sunni Arab collaboration with the US and the Iraqi Government. His position held an important representation since it was the result of the power share between the three communities in Iraq. With a Sunni vice president, Sunnis’ collective consciousness maintained the idea of still being represented at the top level of the state apparatus. Al Hashmi was in exile in Turkey when he was sentenced to death in absentia in September 2012. This decision was like a watershed for the Sunni community from which the IS was keen to take profit as a confirmation of its narrative. In the video, he is depicted to be powerless and without any real prerogatives like the rest of Sunni politicians. Like him Sunni politicians are aware of the imbalance of power but still pretend to hold responsibilities because of the huge amount of money they generate from their position. Rising Sunni politicians who are against Al Maliki such as Osama Al Nujaifi and Al Issawi, the Finance Minister are also depicted as such.

The other message directed towards the Sunni community focuses on the policies of marginalisation and exclusion against it. For the video makers, the government’s discriminatory measures against the Sunni follow a sectarian agenda that goes well beyond the fight against the Islamic State. The bottom line is that from a Sunni perspective, Al Hashmi’s persecution is a symbol of the fate

awaiting every Sunni, meaning whether they collaborate or not with the government Sunnis will be mistreated equally by the Shia government. Shias do not differentiate between “good” and “bad” Sunnis. Therefore they share a common fate and must stop fighting each other and start to concentrate their efforts against the government in Baghdad. In the four videos of the series, IS’ leaders from different generations emphasise the existence of a shared Sunni identity threatened by what they consider a “Safavid” plot. Beyond the socio-political frames cited, the videos try to create a Sunni identity based on a shared fate and feeling of victimisation.

In January of 2013, Saleel Sawareem 3 was published, which celebrates and narrates the successful prison break in Tikrit of October 2012. Testimonies of fugitives from the prison claimed that: “Sunnis are hanged while Shias are spared, the Sunni community is treated globally and Shias do not make exceptions between terrorists, political leaders, Sahawat and innocent civilians”. The best example cited is again the one of Al Hashmi who, after signing death execution orders on Sunni prisoners, was later condemned in absentia to be hanged five times by the same Iraqi state for which he was working. For that reason, the only faction in the country able to defend the Sunni are the Mujahedeen. The last part of the video shows how ISF badly treated Sahawat militiamen in Diyala as a confirmation of the counter-productiveness of their collaboration with the Iraqi state.

Facing the violence of the government towards them, IS offers the hand of mercy and repentance to them in Saleel Sawareem 4 (released in May 2014 after the takeover of Fallujah and part of Ramadi), in which dozens of security members of Fallujah were gathered for collective repentance ceremonies. Two pieces of footage represent this intent to grasp this opportunity to attract new Sunni recruits with skills and experience by not seeking revenge but instead offer them a partnership in order to construct the future Islamic State. In Saleel Sawareem 4 at the 7<sup>th</sup> minute, Adnani’s message is presented, asking the Sahawat, the Sunni politicians to repent and stop fighting the Mujahedeen. According to the IS spokesmen, “anyone repenting before his capture will be granted safety without asking for money or being judged whatever actions he could have committed

before”. He offered the opportunity to all the armed men to give up their weapons to benefit from this offer. Later, a speaker inside a Mosque packed with former Sunni soldiers and policemen addressed them saying: “We are your brothers, your sons, we came to protect your religion and your properties, today is the day of hug, and you know that our Sheikh and Emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi said if they killed from us thousands of thousands pardon them. We pardoned you. Do you know why? We want to protect and unify the Sunni community”. At the 45<sup>th</sup> minute, during another mass repentance ceremony at another mosque in Fallujah, a speaker from IS says, “We do not want you to come and repent out of fear. You should not fear us, we are your brothers and sons”.

Nevertheless, he warns the people not to reverse their allegiance citing without naming it a tribe which, after its repentance, returned to support the government by joining the new Sahawat. The IS speaker threatens any tribe following the same path with utter annihilation. This message was a clear warning to end this reputation among tribes of switching their side according to their interests. Now the group is passing through a period of decline; it will be interesting to see if it will accept repentance from all the tribes which pledged allegiance to it at the apex of its control and retracted it later after the recapture of their zones by the Iraqi forces supported by the coalition. The “repentance door” which has a religious dimension is not new in IS’ discourse and strategy. When the group was in a dire situation in Iraq in 2008, its leaders were already calling the troops not to confront other Sunni groups but rather to find common ground for reconciliation. Back in 2008, an internal communique seized by US forces by Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir urged its fighters to “to fight the true enemy only in order to avoid opening up new fronts against the Sunni who turned against them.”<sup>632</sup> According to Whiteside’s recent article<sup>633</sup> on IS’ policy towards the Sahawat movement, this redemption policy was even criticised by an Al Qaeda’s

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<sup>632</sup> Hashim S Ahmed, *The Caliphate at war*, Hurst London company, 2017, p113

<sup>633</sup> Whiteside, C, “Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State’s Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006-2017)”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague*, 9 (2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2018.1.07>

representative at that time, the Saudi jurist Abu Suleiman. He was disgusted by Al Muhajir's and Baghdadi's 2008 plan to reconcile with Sunni tribes and Iraqi insurgents he considered to be lenient<sup>634</sup>.

### **Conclusion on the frame used by IS in the selected sample**

I identified five specific frames disseminated in the selected videos of the study:

- Sunni politicians are corrupt and are divided over personal interests.
- They are powerless to face the Sunnis' humiliations as is illustrated with women's rape cases and the mass arrest of Sunnis.
- In its treatment against the Sunnis, the Shia government in Baghdad does not differentiate between them; they, therefore, share a common fate.
- The Islamic State is the shield of the Sunni community in Iraq. The only salvation to change the situation is by the use of force.
- The door of repentance remains open for Sunni individuals, whatever opposition they previously manifested towards the organisation.

These frames produced by IS towards its Iraqi Sunni audience are not ideologically or theologically driven but instead try to cement a Sunni identity and convince their Iraqi audience that IS is the only political group able to defend them as a community. For that purpose, it has to show its strength by giving the impression in its videos of being the only striking force capable of devastating the Iraqi Army, Shia militias and countering Iran's influence in Iraq.

The main difference between protestors' demands and IS' frames towards the Sunni community is that protestors did not rise primarily against the Sunni political elite but first against Al Maliki's security policies. The level of disaffection vis a vis the government in Baghdad in Sunni areas was deep, and polls conducted between January and May 2014 confirmed it. Polls conducted by Greenberg IACSS found that Sunnis in the west of the country considered that elections were not fair and that "only 25% in Diyala and 27% in Nineveh thought the

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<sup>634</sup> Ibid p20



elections would offer a genuine choice, against 75% in Basra”.<sup>635</sup> On the eve of Mosul’s fall, a Gallup Poll indicated that in Sunni provinces only 30% of the population had confidence in the national government<sup>636</sup>. According to IIACSS’ polls conducted in the northern provinces of the country, 50 % of Iraqis considered that sectarianism was too deeply rooted in local politics to ever really go away. The widespread idea that the Iraqi Army was not a national army but rather a tool in the hands of the Shia government and Iran was becoming mainstream. Even though Sunni’s anger was not directed toward its elite, IS’ old discourse since Zarqawi’s times of a Shia conspiracy targeting the Sunni as a community was becoming mainstream among the Sunni community.<sup>637</sup>

### *5-The spark of the 2012 protests and the grievances expressed by the Sunni protesters.*

Following the regional context of the Arab Spring, where the civil society demanded political reforms, social equity and dignity, Sunni Arab tribal leaders and political groups started to organise rallies and protest camps across the country against Al Maliki. Before their militarization, the 2012-2013 protests started peacefully and spontaneously and occurred only in Sunni majority areas. Every Friday after the prayer, protestors gathered to listen to the sermons of Sunni clerics who emerged as leaders in the criticism of President Al Maliki. Iraqi Sunni political leaders such as Usama al-Nujaifi, Atheel al-Nujaifi, and Salih al-Mutlaq were losing the popular support they had by the end of 2013 due to the

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<sup>635</sup> Craig Charney, “Polls Key to Understanding and Defeating ISIS”, IPI Global observatory, 9/9/2014, <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/09/polls-understanding-solving-isis-crisis/>

<sup>636</sup> Steve Crabtree, “Faith in Iraqi Government Falls Sharply in Sunni Regions”, Gallup, 27/06/2014, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/171959/faith-iraqi-government-falls-sharply-sunni-regions.aspx>

<sup>637</sup> Craig Charney, “Polls Key to Understanding—and Defeating—ISIS”, IPI Global Observatory, September 9, 2014, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/09/polls-understanding-solving-isis-crisis/>

rising figures of the protests. According to the report on the protests made by Stephen Wicken<sup>638</sup>, two leading figures appeared to lead the protests: Abd al-Malik al-Saadi, the spiritual guide, and Said al-Lafi, the spokesman of the protest in Anbar. Both had a conflictive relationship with the IS and its predecessors, which contradicts any claims that the group could have triggered the protests. Abd al-Malik al-Saadi was one of Iraq's most senior Sunni scholars whose brother was killed by IS. He is said to have influenced the list of demands that were announced by the coordination committees in Anbar and Nineveh on January 6<sup>th</sup>.<sup>639</sup>

Aymenn Tamimi's article<sup>640</sup> on the subject stresses the fact that contrarily to popular opinion, Sunni Arabs did not form a united political front. The demands and the interaction with the authorities were quite different depending on where they took place. For example, protesters in Ramadi endorsed negotiating with Maliki's government, but others in the same city, primarily affiliated with the cleric Abd al-Malik al-Saadi, rejected this approach, denouncing those who supported negotiations as traitors. In Fallujah, more extreme sentiments were spotted, where "al Qaeda banners have been observed in some of the demonstrations together with calls for jihad to overthrow the government and banners endorsing terrorist incidents like the attack on the "Safavid" Ministry of Justice in Baghdad"<sup>641</sup>. For some protestors, the major demand was the complete abolition of the de-Baathification program while others protested against the warrant issued against the Vice President Tariq Al Hashimi and the former Minister of Finance, Rafi Al Issawi. However, the question of female prisoners' fates and the allegation of their systematic rapes was unanimously repeated to mobilise the Sunnis (a constant theme in IS' propaganda as we saw earlier).

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<sup>638</sup> Stephen Wicken, "Iraqis Sunnis in crisis", middle east security Report, May 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Wicken-Sunni-In-Iraq.pdf>

<sup>639</sup> Ibid p27

<sup>640</sup> Aymenn Jawad Tamimi, "Behind the Iraq Protests", The American Spectator ,18-4-2013, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/13188/iraq-protests>

<sup>641</sup> Ibid

Protests across the country culminated with the clashes of Hawijah Camp in April 2013, when government forces attacked the camp claiming that IS members were present and killed dozens of protestors. This clash sparked a wave of sectarian violence across the country and created a strong feeling of discrimination and opposition within the Sunnis and among them the Sahawat movement. IS tried to infiltrate protest camps in Anbar and influence protestors by calling them to choose between “elections and their parties and the tax of humiliation” and “arms and jihad and the tax of dignity”.<sup>642</sup> Divisions between Sunni Iraqi political parties were widened by pro and anti-Maliki protesters. It was thus confirming one of IS’ frames: the inherent fracture of Sunni political parties based on their interests. Osama al-Nujaifi’s *Mutahidun* bloc and leading Islamic Iraqi Party members such as Ahmed al-Alwani defied Al Maliki while appearing regularly at protests in Anbar, Nineveh, and Salahudeen. Facing them, were Sunni politicians allied with Maliki such as the Mutlak karbouli’s Arab Iraqiyya bloc, which remained with the President and presented itself as a mediator with the protestors. This attempt was unsuccessful since they ejected them from protest camps. In Nineveh and Anbar, elections were postponed officially for security reasons after a wave of attacks perpetrated by IS. This decision was also interpreted as a political move “intended to strengthen Maliki’s Sunni allies and hamper his strongest opponents”<sup>643</sup>.

Many of the demands were broad and referred to long-held grievances among Sunnis. Al Saadi personally proposed two specific demands on TV regarding the possibility for female prisoners held in Baghdad to be transferred to detention in Anbar and the repeal of the law formalising the division between Shia and Sunni religious endowments. Al Saadi emerged as a voice for the protestors and presented their 13 demands<sup>644</sup> on TV on 6<sup>th</sup>, January 2013.

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<sup>642</sup> Sinan Adnan and Aaron Reese, “Iraq’s Sunni insurgency”, Middle east security report 24, October 2014, p32, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Sunni%20Insurgency%20in%20Iraq.pdf>

<sup>643</sup> Ibid

<sup>644</sup> “ 1. Release all female prisoners accused under the counterterrorism law and referral of their cases to their home provinces; refer the women of Baghdad specifically to Anbar, and transfer

We can distinguish between two types of demands, the broad ones that referred to long-held grievances among Sunnis and others with a national scope asking for state neutrality. Grievances were accurately framed by Al Furqan Media in the five years preceding the protests such as the denunciation of the Counterterrorism Law<sup>645</sup> to conduct mass arrests, the outcry related to female prisoners' fates, the surge of death penalty sentences for Sunnis and the condition of living under occupation because of the barriers and raid nights on civilian homes. Other demands formulated were part of the protestors' agenda

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the case against Rafia al-Issawi and his guards to courts in Anbar; prosecute culpable officers and rapists connected with the above-mentioned cases.

2. End implementation of the death penalty.
3. Freeze execution of Article 4 of the Counterterrorism Law until it can be voided by parliament.
4. Parliament should pass the General Amnesty Law, remove exceptions, and release all prisoners.
5. Freeze execution of the Accountability and Justice Law until parliament can repeal it.
6. Achieve balance in all institutions of the state, especially the military, security services, and judiciary.
7. Repeal the operations commands in all provinces and all unconstitutional elements of the security services; withdraw the army from cities and inhabited neighbourhoods in Baghdad and the provinces; remove the concrete barriers; Work fervently to provide security to citizens, and devolve responsibility for security to local police.
8. Reinvestigate cases related to religious and national leaders inside and outside Iraq in neutral judicial forums free from political influence.
9. Prohibit the use of sectarian phrases and slogans in state institutions, especially in the security services and the media.
10. Undertake a comprehensive national census before the next general elections, including reference to religious, sectarian, and ethnic identity.
11. End arbitrary night raids, arrest accused persons in the light of day by legal methods, and end the "secret informer" law.
12. Form a Federal Supreme Court of professional and non-corrupt judges who does not belong to any specific ruling party or bloc, to serve as an independent, non-politicized judiciary.
13. Return all mosques and other religious properties as well as private properties improperly taken under expropriation, and repeal Law No. 19 of 2005 (the Law Governing the Holy Shrines and Shia Pilgrimages, which formally separated the Shia and Sunni religious endowments.

<sup>645</sup> "Mosul's protestors : we don't trust the government's promises and will continue to protest until the abolition of the terrorism law" , Al Mada Press , 9/01/2013, <https://goo.gl/8JfBcd>

and ideological spectrum such as the repeal of the accountability and Justice Law of 2008 that governs de-Baathification and the withdrawal of the law formalising the division between Shia and Sunni religious endowments. They were demands principally formulated against sectarianism asking for more sectarian balance within the state apparatus and differed radically from IS' sectarian separatist views.

The issue of female prisoners was a source of mobilisation among Iraqi Sunnis even before the Arab Spring-inspired protests of late 2012. Protests<sup>646</sup> were taking place in Mosul in early 2012, where tribal leaders and civil society figures organised rallies in the governorate to call for the release of female prisoners. Reports emerged that women were being arrested without being prosecuted and raped to extort their confessions, implicating their husbands in terrorist activities. In January 2013, during the wave of protests, the imam of Mosul Idriss Rifai called for civilian disobedience until the female prisoners were freed<sup>647</sup>. The traditional value of "I'rd" which means honour, is significant among the traditional tribal society and can constitute a motive of mobilisation and revenge as defended by IS in its frames.

There were other demands widespread among protestors that were not formulated in the 13 demands of Al Saadi, such as the call for federalism or the creation of tribal militia for self-protection. These demands found an echo in IS' frames with its early calls for separatism and its presentation as the shield of the Sunni facing Shia forces. Even though some anti-IS figures led the protestors, such as Sahawat leaders Ahmed Abu Risha, Ali Hatem al-Suleiman, Mohammed Mahmood Latif al-Fahdawi, and Al Saadi, the group nonetheless had an indirect influence on them. Because of the attacks on and harassment of the security forces, many protestors began to call for the formation of a protection force. The self-fulfilling prophecy of IS videos in 2010 that "Shias will turn against Sunnis"

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<sup>646</sup> "Nineveh protests against the rape of Female prisoners and the National council: Nujaiji harms the reputation of Iraqi women", Al Mada Press, 29/11/2012, <https://goo.gl/GtkuGP>

<sup>647</sup> "The chief of the Federal police : we attacked the protestors when they tried to take over our Humvees and call for a Free Army", Al Mada Press , 07/01/2013, <https://goo.gl/JvFgx7>

was becoming a reality in their minds. The more Shias marginalised the Sunnis the more IS' discourse accurately depicted their reality. The prevalent idea among the protestors of the necessity of having a protective force may have confirmed the idea of the IS as protector of the Sunnis. In Salahudeen, protestors were calling for the formation of a "tribal army"<sup>648</sup> for self-defence, and the same call was made in Anbar, where "the army of pride and honour" was to be formed to "defend the Sunnis from the brutality of the Prime Minister Al Maliki".<sup>649</sup>

The militarization of the protests was another element that could explain the acceptance of the group by some Sunni protestors. Pacifism and the change of the status quo by democratic means were not only considered by IS as illegitimate from an Islamic point of view but also counterproductive. At the same time as the Iraqi protest, the military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood elected president in Egypt and the bloody repression against the Rabiaa protest camp on August 14<sup>th</sup> were, according to IS' spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, confirmation of the rightness of its methodology. On August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013, in a recording entitled "*Al-Silmiyya Dinu Mann?*" (Lit-Pacifism is the Religion of Whom?<sup>650</sup>), he stressed that the Muslim Brotherhood's methodology and democratic system were un-Islamic and that fighting following the Islamic methodology was the only way to change the status quo<sup>651</sup>. To justify his claims, he used 14 verses from the Quran<sup>652</sup> calling for violence and by intertwining the

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<sup>648</sup> "Protestors in Salahudine give 24 h to the religious councils to give their position on Maliki and start to form a tribal army", Al Mada Press, 23/04/2013, <https://goo.gl/aeHLVB>

<sup>649</sup> "Anbar's protestors to the governor : change your position , the army of dignity will be formed soon", Al Mada Press, <https://goo.gl/Mz3piY>

<sup>650</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, an audio recording entitled "*Al-Silmiyya Dinu Mann?*" (Lit., Peacefulness is the Religion of Whom?), available [in Arabic] on the following link: <http://bab-ul-islam.net/showthread.php?t=20110> and in English <https://archive.org/details/PacifismIsTheReligionOfWhom>

<sup>651</sup> ibid p4 Confrontation is unavoidable and the peaceful calls are to the garbage: Time has come for us to understand and recognize and acknowledge that pacifism doesn't bring a right or invalidates a falsehood; time has come for the callers to stop their false claims, the people of Kufr can never be at peace with the people of Iman, and an unarmed peaceful Iman cannot stand in the face of an assaulting armed criminal Kufr."

<sup>652</sup> "No! Gaining dignity and liberation from oppression and breaking the shackles of humiliation is only by the clank of the swords, and shedding blood, offering the souls and spirits,

situation in Egypt and Iraq he demonstrated that authoritarian regimes could not be overthrown through peaceful means, mocking protestors who were still committed to pacifism.<sup>653</sup>

Adnani's discourse shows how the group tried to benefit from the violent crackdown on peaceful protests to recruit new members deceived by the failure and impossibility of a peaceful regime change experience in the Arab region. In the context of the international community's backing of the Iraqi Government, Sunni protestors in Iraq felt that Al Maliki's departure with peaceful means was impossible. On January 11<sup>th</sup>, members of the UN council expressed support for the efforts of the Iraqi Government in Anbar province against the described violence and "terrorism".<sup>654</sup> As recalled by Hassan Abu Haniyeh, the UN condemned IS' terrorist attacks without any actual reference to the demands of protestors<sup>655</sup>. The US also supported Al Maliki without giving any credit to the protestors. In November 2013, President Obama said how he appreciated Prime Minister Maliki's commitment to ensuring a strong, prosperous, inclusive, and democratic Iraq. He also declared "that we were encouraged by the work that Prime Minister Maliki has done in the past to ensure that all people inside of Iraq Sunni, Shia, and Kurd feel that they have a voice in their government".<sup>656</sup> As

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it will never be by the peaceful calls or parliamentary elections. No! this isn't the guidance of our prophet peace and blessings of Allah (...) If we want today to lift the injustice and spread justice and invalidate falsehood and restore our glory, dignity, pride and sovereignty then we have to return to the Book of our Lord Almighty the truest words, and the guidance of our prophet."

<sup>653</sup> Ibid p12, He says "Firstly: we advise Ahli Sunnah in general and in Egypt and Iraq in particular to reject the peaceful calls, and carry the arms and do jihad for the sake of Allah to repel the assaulter from the Egyptian army and the Safavid army, since the sane people have agreed to repel the assaulter, so is the mind of the atheist communist better than the mind of the peaceful subservient Sheikh of Al-Azhar?! Even the chicken repels who assaults it chicks! So is the chicken braver than you callers for pacifism in Egypt and Iraq?!"

<sup>654</sup> "Anbar Province Terrorism Major Threat to Building Democratic State in Iraq", Top United Nations Official Warns Security Council, Security Council 7149th Meeting (PM) 27 MARCH 2014, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11339.doc.htm>

<sup>655</sup> Hassan Abu Haniyeh, Dr Mohamed Abu Ruhman, *The Islamic State organization : the Sunni Organization and the struggle for Global Jihadism*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015, Amman, p167, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/11458.pdf>

<sup>656</sup> Peter Beinrat, "Obama's Disastrous Iraq Policy: An Autopsy", The Atlantic Journal, JUN 23, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/obamas-disastrous-iraq-policy-an-autopsy/373225/>

explained by Abu Haniya, “this declaration essentially confirmed the world’s indifference towards Iraqi Sunni’s peaceful activism”.<sup>657</sup> This feeling of isolation further increased their victimisation rhetoric especially in a context where all the regional efforts for Sunni powers were directed at supporting the Syrian rebellion. The rise of a Sunni identity based on perceived victimisation overpassing regional, tribal bonds thus created a breeding ground for the group’s ideology to thrive. Sectarian divisions exacerbated this trend, like in 2006 with the potential of dividing other solidarity bonds such the tribal culture or the national feelings inside the Iraqi society.

Moreover, the rise of autonomism as a new form of self-government called for by Sunnis in the protest could explain to a certain degree the acceptance of some of IS’ political project. It was a climate of anger and resentment in a wide segment of the protestors that prompted the establishment of insurgent military councils and calls for separatism. For the first time, voices inside the Sunni community began to ask moderately for what Zarqawi argued for from the beginning: sectarian separatism<sup>658</sup>. After the 2003 reconfiguration of power, many among the Sunni Arab elite did not accept their new status of minority and their reduced political weight. In fact, by 2012, the idea of a Sunni autonomous region became popular in certain circles in the elite. During the protests, the protestors’ committee of the six Arab Sunni provinces called for the adoption of a white flag of the Sunni Arabs<sup>659</sup>. In Salahudeen, protestors gathered to call for more decentralisation and more autonomy like in Kurdistan. Imams voiced those calls during the Friday sermons in Samarra in 2013. According to Hashim, when protests surged many among the Sunni thought that it was time to take revenge and give a massive blow to the Shia dominated government in Baghdad. At the same time, Shia’s paranoia of giving power to Sunni meant that many pragmatic

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<sup>657</sup> Hassan Abu Hanieh , Dr Mohamed Abu Ruhman, *The Islamic State organization : the Sunni Organization and the struggle for Global Jihadism* , Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015, Amman p167, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/11458.pdf>

<sup>658</sup> Ahmed S Hashim , *the Caliphate at war*, Hurst and Company London, 2017, p245

<sup>659</sup> “Protestors in Salahudine : the white flag will be the flag of the Sunni of Iraq and we will not follow a single party in the elections”, Al Mada Press, 20/12/2013, <https://goo.gl/AH92cT>



Sunni leaders were thinking about the promotion of an autonomous region at that time but were surprised by IS' creation of the caliphate. Many tribal leaders overestimated their power by choosing to confront the Islamic State only after a change of government in Baghdad<sup>660</sup>. Some of them were hoping to take advantage of the jihadists and get rid of them after taking Baghdad. IS grasped this opportunity by taking advantage of Sunni Arab grievances and armed opposition to the sectarian policies as well as proposing itself as an alternative to the Sunni political and tribal elites. Its media was efficient in redefining the Sunni identity in Iraq to discredit the Sahawat and enhance IS' status as the community's shield. Sectarianism and bad strategic planning of its foes were thus key in explaining the conjunction of elements in line with IS' strategic goals.

The idea shared after the success of the Sahawat experience in 2007 that Iraqi Sunnis were immune from sympathising for the group because of its brutality and actions was proven to be wrong. As detailed by Carter Malkasian<sup>661</sup>, the vanishing of US aid to the Sahawat, the end of the cooperation with the government and the withdrawal of the US were the main reasons for the return of the group in Anbar. The domination of the tribes against IS was "artificial" not "natural"<sup>662</sup>, and popular support for them or against ISI was not a fact to explain their success. The group's popular support is difficult to weigh in. Nevertheless, we can observe that it was able to attract enough support to sustain its operations, break and divide tribes and when imposing its rules, not suffer a backlash from the population. The turning point in Anbar was reached when the Maliki government become more irritant and unpopular than the Islamic State. It explained why tribesmen unaffiliated with the group began to join the movement, considered as the best and the more efficient actor capable of stopping

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<sup>660</sup> Ahmed S Hashim, "the Caliphate at war", Hurst and Company London, 2017 p180 "Our experience in Anbar with Al-Qaeda in 2006 is a perfect example of our ability to deal with ISIS. We've postponed fighting ISIS until we get rid of Nouri al-Maliki. As for the Anbar tribes, we consider Maliki to be more dangerous than ISIS" said Sheikh Hatem al-Suleiman, a former influential tribal leader from the Dulaim confederation.

<sup>661</sup> Carter Malkasian, *Illusion of victory : the Anbar Awakening and the rise of the Islamic State*, Oxford university Press, 2017

<sup>662</sup> Ibid p8

government forces. While its strictness was considered as the reason for the backlash of the tribes in 2006, it became a minor irritant overpassed by the necessity to expel the army from the Sunni heartland. This openness regarding the Islamic State was also due to the underestimation of its power by other actors. Tribal openness towards IS was faced by a reconciliatory policy of the group, accepting the repentance of Sunni enemies. As a result, the situation in 2014 was very fluid with the adherence to the group of hundreds of Sunni from different backgrounds and with different reasons for joining. Security members or militiamen joined the group and the bureaucracy and security apparatus of its nascent state.

IS did not instigate the protests even though it may have had a certain degree of influence in protest camps where the group's flag was present<sup>663</sup>. Its physical presence may have given it a forum to fight for the heart of the people and spread its ideas, but this topic remains so far under-investigated. The hypothesis that IS' frames mirrored the protestors' ones is therefore partly true. The analysis of Al Furqan videos highlights that contrary to the widespread idea, its videos are not just focusing on gruesome and action scenes (Flames of War) or theological decrees but hold a political and social dimension. By denouncing corruption and the double standard treatment, the group uses frames used by social movements such as NGOs in other contexts. The group framed accurately the main grievances of the Sunnis during the five years preceding the protests : humiliations, women's mistreatment in prisons, double standard policy, sectarianism and elite's corruption. It interpreted the protestors' demands as a confirmation of its diagnosis back in 2010. Furthermore, the realisation of its self-fulfilling prophecies about the fate of the Sunnis confirmed in the eyes of its members the righteousness of the group's prognosis.

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<sup>663</sup> It was the case in Fallujah

## 6-Findings and Conclusion

Concerning LH's Grand Strategy in Iraq and its application by IS, I have presented the group's influence and strategies towards tribes and armed groups. I now assess IS' adherence to LH's Grand Strategy principles that should govern war.

**1-“The better your strategy, the easier you will gain the upper hand and the less it will cost you”.**

This maxim refers to the ability to use limited resources to achieve its objective. As defined by Liddle Hart, Grand Strategy is “the art of finding the Achilles heel of the enemy to make war”. For the case study, the Iraqi Government's “Achilles heel” was Maliki's sectarian policy. Some of the frames used by the group's propaganda were essentially capitalising on Sunnis' resentment and emphasising the sectarian polarization the country was witnessing. By taking advantage and framing the political and social grievances of the Sunnis accurately, the group could attract support and ease the hostility of some groups towards it. According to the SMT, the fact that protestors shared many of its frames shows that it could align its frames with the demands and opinions shared by many Iraqi Sunnis and thus create a favourable mobilisation process in its favour.

This process may have been significant in order to gain the community's tacit acceptance as well as the neutrality or tactical collaboration of competitive groups from the tribes or the Sunni insurgency. This alliance of convenience had the particular effect of overstressing Iraqi forces in Anbar, Nineveh and Salahudeen Province and opening up breaches for the group to infiltrate. Most of IS' frames towards the Sunni population were not ideological nor religious which can make us believe that part of the support it enjoyed was not for its Salafi-jihadist worldview but rather its perception of itself as a shield for the Sunni population in Iraq and Syria. Further research specifically focusing on Iraqis joining the group on an individual basis could confirm or deny this observation. However, this level of pragmatism was not sufficient to build up a broader favourable tribal dynamic. Indeed, some social structures antagonistic to the group remained impermeable

to its propaganda or the necessity of fighting Al Maliki. The most striking example is the case of the city of Dhuluiyah, where the IS' narrative did not have an impact since the Sunni tribes of Jubur preferred to ally with the most aligned pro-Iran militias from Balad rather than surrender their area to IS.

In addition to its growing appeal among the Sunni population, the group was able to take advantage of the rise of autonomism among Sunnis and the militarization of the protests. Because Sunni militias were not experienced and did not have access to weapons, Sunni calling for a protective force would not have any other alternative than turning to IS as a protector. Consequently, Sunni organisers of protests were not for IS' presence but could not confront it because they were aware of their vulnerability. Protestors close to Ahmed Abu Risha in Ramadi were partisans of dialogue with the Maliki government and supported the ISF against IS while others distanced themselves from it. Fallujah's case symbolised best the growing dependence of the armed protestors on IS' protection. When in December 2013 Ahmed Al Issawi was arrested, most of the protestors supported armed confrontation with the Iraqi security forces. IS started low profile by sharing power with the different militias and participating in the city's war council with few participants on an individual basis. A month later, IS captured the entire city while the ISF was occupied clearing protest camps. By taking Fallujah, it symbolically positioned itself as the defender of Iraqi Sunnis giving more weight to this frame. The following months saw the broad-based offensive north-west of the country confirming it. To conclude, the level of pragmatism shown by the group in order to come back, its sophisticated propaganda effort to gain support and its political choice to prioritise its fight are in line with what we can expect from the adherence to this principle of Liddle Hart's Grand Strategy.

## **2) "The more you are brutal, the more your enemy' resistance will be".**

Regarding the use of violence, LH's vision of the use of violence is inversely proportional; the more brutal your methods are, the more bitter you will make your opponents, with the natural result of hardening their resistance. IS' methods towards the non-Sunni components were utterly in opposition to LH's vision regarding the counterproductive effects of using mass violence. While IS'

used strategic violence to shock, deter<sup>664</sup> and mobilise, Liddle Hart considers that its widespread use might exacerbate the opponent's will to fight. Consequently, the perspective of breaking its psychological equilibrium would be jeopardized. We saw how for the whole IS' campaign, the morale and will to fight were paramount in determining the opponent's psychological equilibrium and the subsequent dislocation of the ISF in the north of the country.

The Speicher massacre in June 2014, where 700 Shia cadets were executed, generated a massive outcry among the Shia community. In the eyes of the Shias of Iraq, the war against IS became a war for survival which would ignite a fierce resistance especially after Adnani's speech threatening to destroy Karbala and Najaf and occupy Baghdad. The threat was credible; the city Jurf Sakhr situated in Babel governorate was only 50km from Karbala and had been occupied by the group since February of 2014. The level of resistance shown by the Iraqi Army and the Shia militias defending Baghdad and Shia cities was of another magnitude and intensity than the one they displayed in Sunni cities in 2014. The creation of the PMU, coupled with the surge of Iran's interference boosted the defence of Baghdad and shifted the psychological equilibrium to the advantage of the forces fighting IS. The same counterproductive effect applies to recalcitrant tribes refusing to surrender to IS despite being outnumbered and under siege. The Jaghafiya, the Jubur and the Sahawat tribes in Ramadi had a history of bloody fights against the group that could not be overpassed by their hostility towards a common enemy.

The fact that IS uses violence and mediatises it in order to multiply its impact also had another counterproductive result according to Liddle Hart's vision. The group's decapitation policy can be traced back to Abu Mosab al-Zarqawi's infamous beheading of American hostage Nick Berg in 2004. He was dressed in an orange jumpsuit to mimic the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, and his beheading was broadcasted online as retaliation for the tortures in Abu Ghraib.

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<sup>664</sup> It follows Abu Bakr Al Naji's assertion that there is no place to softness since "Regardless of whether we use harshness or softness, our enemies will not be merciful to us if they seize us. Thus, it behoves us to make them think one thousand times before attacking us."

In 2005, the group saw the strategic benefit of these type of scenes confirmed with the withdrawal of the Philippines from the coalition in Iraq to avoid the beheading of one of its citizens. Ten years later, the beheading of Western journalists after the US Air Force's intervention to save Erbil had an opposite effect. Instead of forcing the disengagement of the US and the UK for their support of the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Government, the airstrikes expanded to Syria, and it hastened the formation of an international coalition against the group. The efforts of such a coalition in supporting its allies on the ground would be the angular pillar behind the takeover of all the cities occupied by IS.

The only exception of the unlimited use of violence by the group was their treatment of the Sunni population in Iraq. The consistency of the repentance policy proposed to Sunni tribal and state collaborators is worth noting. From 2008 to 2014, under different leaders and in different circumstances from a non-favourable balance of power in 2008 to undisputed domination, the group's repentance policy towards its Sunni constituency was constant. It translates a clear broad and long-term strategy applied in order to gain the support of the Sunni community. This policy could have worked as an incentive for the allegiance of tribes or the neutral position adopted by other groups during that period. Sunni cadets at Speicher Camp were spared during the massacre, and until late 2013 the beheadings of Sunnis were not broadcast by the group. We shall remember that at the same time the group was fighting until death against the Sunni Syrian rebels, labelled as new Sahawats by the group's propaganda.

In sum, the group applied this recommendation but only against its Sunni foes for a limited period. However, from a general perspective, it appears that the group believes more in the multiplying effect of excessive violence rather than its potential counterproductivity.

3- **Wage war while preparing future peace refers to foresee the peace condition.**

The discriminatory use of violence by the group can be linked to the group's long-term strategy of building a Sunni state. While reconquering Sunni cities, it made the political decision of not seeking vengeance but instead accepting the repentance of hundreds of Sahawat fighters and Sunni security forces. This policy finds an echo in Liddle Hart's principle of preparing for peace while waging war. As Liddle Hart says, "the object of war is to obtain a better peace. Even if only from your point of view, it is essential to conduct war with constant regard to the peace you desire". He adds that "if you concentrate exclusively on victory, with no thought for the after effect, you may be too exhausted to profit by the peace, while it is almost certain that the peace will be a bad one, containing the germs of another war."<sup>665</sup>

The group wanted to build a Sunni state in Iraq and could not afford to execute or lose the competence of hundreds of Sunni Iraqis with experience in bureaucracy, law enforcement and state affairs. Through al- Baghdadi's voice during the assault on Ramadi the group repeatedly called the families of the Sahawat fleeing towards Baghdad to come back with the assurance of not being harmed. Inside the Sunni Arab sphere, IS understood the necessity to build peace during the wartime by offering an amnesty to the Sunni members of the security forces they were fighting.

However, IS' maximalist vision of peace and revolutionary anti-world order vision makes it completely repulsive to LH's terms of peace at the international level. Before the declaration of the caliphate, IS' strategy was to fight against the near enemy, the one "martyrizing" the Sunni population of Iraq and Syria: the Shia of the region supported by Iran. Fighting the near enemy and the building of a borderless caliphate were the two pillars of IS' Grand Strategy at the international level. Despite some basic plots carried out under its name (2008 failed attack in Scotland), IS did not focus much of its international activity unlike Al Qaeda

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<sup>665</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, Yale University Press ,1992 , p 168

Central in targeting the West. Instead, it tried to operate regionally by targeting Jordan and providing support to the Fath Al Islam group in Lebanon. These moves were not endorsed by Al Qaeda central, which preferred to target the West and see AQI focus on targeting US troops in Iraq. Al Qaeda also prevented ISI from targeting Iran directly for logistical purposes and because of the presence of many of its cadres in the jails of the Iranian regime. Al Zawahri's main argument against Baghdadi's decision to merge its Syria and Iraqi organizations was his obligation to operate within its geographical boundaries. The ideological and theological roots of both IS and Al Qaeda can also explain their divergence in terms of strategy. IS' action is more centred on purifying Islam by focusing on attacking apostate Muslim states from its interpretation of Ibn Taymiyah's fatwas and endorsing Ibn Abd Wahhab's vision of cleansing the Islamic world from the deviant sects such as Shia and Sufi. In both cases, Ibn Abd Al Wahhab's and Ibn Taymiyah's foes were two non-western powers claiming to represent Islam: the Mongols and the Ottomans. Al Qaeda has an anti-western and anti-colonial centred paradigm inherited from its Egyptian Brotherhood and Qutbist branch, which embraces Al Banna and Qutb as its ideological founding fathers. IS' political horizon does not end with expelling the US from the Arabian Peninsula and destroying the state of Israel, which were the two main objectives presented by the fatwa of the "World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders" presenting the political framework of Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri's organisation in 1998. As long as IS stuck to its near enemy project it did not attract much attention from the big powers. The US, especially after 9/11, considered the threat and power of a jihadi group only from the prism of its capacity to target the West. President Obama compared IS to a rookie team wearing Lakers shirts (Al Qaeda)<sup>666</sup>, showing how he underestimated the threat the group was posing to the international order as well as explain the West's inaction before the declaration of the Caliphate.

The Caliphate declaration in July 2014 changed IS' strategic aims and ambitions. By declaring itself the sole legitimate political actor of the Islamic world and the

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<sup>666</sup>"Obama's Evolution on ISIS", New York Times, 9/06/2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/09/world/middleeast/obama-isis-strategy.html>



unique legitimate depository of jihad, it automatically had to take the lead in targeting the Far Enemy: the West led by the US and other international powers. The surprise attack on Kurdistan's capital Erbil in August 2014 internationalised IS' aspirations. It was a tactical victory but was a wrong political calculus from LH's perspective. Some analysts have pointed out to the impossibility of IS taking Baghdad and the end of a deal with the Kurds to explain the attack while others have only pointed to its boldness and the euphoria of victory. Luizard considers that the decision to build the caliphate across the borders was taken after the Kurdish decision in July 2014 to finally intervene against IS' expansion after having passively witnessed the group's takeover of the region of Nineveh. IS' decision to internationalise the conflict and provoke the West was due, according to the author, to their failure to conquer Baghdad and the "reversal of the Kurds"<sup>667</sup>.

At the same time that the group witnessed a stalemate in Dhuluiyah as we saw and failed to take urban areas in Diyala, it decided to proclaim the caliphate and to become a regional actor and a state representing Islam worldwide. The internationalisation of the conflict and the expansion of the group made the US and their allies intervene by providing air support to the ISF and the Peshmerga. One of the reasons for IS' advance was the absence of air forces for the Iraqis and the Peshmerga, which is paramount in order to halt the advance of IS' convoys in flat terrain and desert areas. By provoking stronger enemies, IS attracted them and changed the balance of the conflict in its disadvantage despite the repeated claims of IS leaders that the US and their allies would send boots on the ground and deploy them massively, repeating the quagmire scenario of the past decade. This strategic forecast proved to be wrong; the coalition opted for a limited deployment of advisers and special operation forces supporting their local allies. Combined with massive air support, this indirect and limited strategy was enough in rolling back the group's conquests.

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<sup>667</sup> Pierre Jean Luizard, *Le piège Daech L'État islamique ou le retour de l'Histoire*, Editions La Découverte, 2015, p32

The declaration of the caliphate and destruction of the Sykes-Picot borders propelled the group into a new strategic framework, from the creation and fortification of a Sunni state between Iraq and Syria into adopting the vision of an Islamic Empire. By proclaiming itself as the state of the Muslims worldwide, this political move obliged the group not to conform to the international borders. While before its transnational aspiration was theoretical, it became real in July 2014. Acceptance of the state-nation model by recognising the legitimacy of a neighbouring state is antithetical to IS' ideology. It, therefore, put the state it proclaimed in a state of constant war with the international system, even though there is still the possibility of brokering truces. As the Islamic State of Iraq explained in its early scriptures, "the state of war is a natural state in the life of the Islamic State, whether at the beginning of its development, before and after".<sup>668</sup> Despite its frontal opposition to the international order, in particular moments, the group can find some conveniences and diplomatic contacts with other states. We can cite the negotiations to free hostages (50 Turkish citizens from Turkey consulate in Mosul) or the neutral posture adopted with Syria between 2003 and 2011 and Turkey between 2011 and 2016. The group leadership can, for logistical reasons, prioritise its fighting. These examples are not permanent and too specific to shape any broad strategic shift that could change its ideological framework toward an acceptance of the international order.

The group is against the principle of sovereignty inherited from the Westphalia model. It is not conceived as a state but rather as an empire where local allegiances are structuring the relations between the governed and the governor. IS' vision of international relations is complex to grasp since it shares many ideas from the diverse schools of thought explaining international relations. It has a realist dimension since this school of thought considers that because of the anarchical model of the international system, there is a constant state of war between states in a zero-sum game. Peace is not permanent but rather the fruit of a balance of power and interests shaping states' relations. However, the realist school considers that survival and rational calculus are shaping the state's

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<sup>668</sup> Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*, Yale University Press, 2017, p232

decisions. This contradicts the vision of IS' strategists; its ideological purity is more important than its military performance or strategic considerations. They believe its survival is part of God's universal rules and part of what we could explain as providence. In this aspect IS is liberal, understood in its philosophical roots as an idealist school of thought. It believes that the main driver behind its state is not its selfish interests or survival but its ideology and religious doctrine. By focusing on the Sykes-Picot agreements, the destruction of borders inherited from the colonial period, it also has a postcolonial dimension in its vision of international relations as the result of colonial political decisions. Finally, IS' transnational aspirations and global reach with the building of an international identity and its structure with cells shaped in networks or by inspired individuals go against all the state-centric models cited above.

In the context of its rivalry to lead the Jihadi International movement, IS for ideological reasons could not focus only on preserving its nascent state, by accommodating itself with international borders. Indeed, a new dimension in IS rhetoric and strategic framework is the battle of credibility and outbidding for ideological purity among the jihadi public worldwide against Al Qaeda. The sudden change of paradigm from defending the Sunni of the Middle East to expanding a caliphate worldwide without possessing the necessary means and resources proved to be fatal in the middle term for the group's capacity to sustain its state model in Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, at the same time, it had the effect of internationalising the group's presence worldwide with a dozen new safe havens, from which the group would apply its five phases as part of its strategic framework<sup>669</sup>. By aspiring to be the global leader of the jihadi movement, it consequently decided not to sequence its fight and attack at the same time all its enemies. However, challenging the US and the rest of the world is also a way to strengthen its ideological narrative and confirm its authentic and unique status of the defender of Islam. Perpetual warfare until the final hour, as described by IS' literature to describe its fight and the impossibility of peace, illustrates the group's ambitious aims that go against any adoption of Liddle Hart's Grand Strategy

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<sup>669</sup> Hijrah, jama'a, Nikaya, tamkin, Khilafa

guidelines at the international level. Unlike IS, Al Qaeda claims publicly its adherence to LH's approach by adopting with its affiliates Grand Strategy principles that impact its methodology such as truces offered to its enemies, the seeking of popular support, gradualism, sequencing of battles and cooperation with groups from a different ideological spectrum. A further comparative study on the adherence of both group to the LH's approach in their strategy as a variable impacting the ideological rift between both movements could explain why they became in frontal opposition despite claiming to represent both the legacy of Osama Bin Laden and Abu Mosab Al Zarqawi.

# IX-Conclusion

The thesis' research question aimed to understand IS' strategy during its resurgence, using, as a theoretical framework, LH's principles from a tactical, strategic and Grand Strategy perspective. Based on the analysis of IS' strategy during its resurgence in 2012-2015, it has contributed to the field of terrorist organisation behaviour, jihadi strategy and guerrilla warfare. The hypothesis was that IS' resurgence was due to its adherence to LH's principles at tactical, strategic and Grand Strategy levels. After reaching a low point in 2010 facing near extinction, a confluence of factors led to the group's resurgence four years later. As already presented in the literature, external factors coupled with extraordinary political opportunities offered by the Syrian conflict were crucial factors explaining its rebound. Monocausal determinism being impossible for the case study, it is sure that the group's resurgence was no accident and resulted from a convergence of many factors. The most important of these elements being the specific historical circumstances which happened between 2011 and 2012 such as the collapse of the Assad government in Eastern Syria, the US withdrawal from Iraq and rising antagonism between President Maliki and the Sunni political and tribal elite. However, an explanation that relies merely on the fall of ISF or the Sahawat and their internal problems while not taking into account the strategy deployed by the group is not satisfying.

The contribution of this study was to shed light on how IS exploited these opportunities by using LH's approach. IS' strategy while taking advantage of the context was patient with a protracted and thoughtful policy that proved to be successful in order to extend its domination over a broad span of the Iraqi territory. The group took advantage of its mastering of technology, a resilient ideology coupled with smart strategic decisions taken that led the group to capitalise on significant opportunities after 2011. The observation of IS' adherence to his axioms gives a new perspective to the explanation of its resurgence and its military strategy. What I found is that IS' military operations in general adhered to LH's principles at the tactical and strategic level during its period of rebound except for launching frontal attacks and some geographic

exceptions. From a Grand Strategy perspective, in its relation with Sunni rivals, it applied LH's recommendations but did not apply them at all against its other rivals and enemies. This finding goes against the idea shared in the literature that limits the understanding of IS policy only from a brutal maximalist approach perspective. In IS' strategy, there is room for gradualism but it is a discriminated one only directed at its targeted audience.

The fact that IS' resurgence can be explained from LH's perspective has as a first consequence concerning the literature that it is resisting the temptation to see the object of the study as something exceptional. The second consequence is that it can fill a gap about the understandings of the events that led to the fall of 1/3 of Iraq into its hands which were sometimes oversimplified to the weaknesses of the Iraqi Army. The fact this thesis proves that IS by its actions successfully exploited the dislocation of the Iraqi Army according to LH's theory to reach a decisive victory makes its originality. The adoption of a three-dimensional prism of analysis can verify this assertion and stress out the group's shapeshifting nature. Indeed, the literature argues that IS is a guerrilla army and territorial administrator (Fromson and Simon, 2015), a hybrid terrorist organisation (Karatrantos 2015)<sup>670</sup>, a revolutionary armed group (Kalyvas, 2015), a revolutionary state (Walt, 2015), and a pseudo-state (Cronin, 2015). By adopting the insurgent's central principle of non-confrontation, inspiring itself from successful COIN experiences, continuously use terror as a mode of action and by spreading worldwide a broad and consistent media campaign, IS was a fluid and shape-shifting actor. Its use of COIN strategy reinforces the literature that envisions IS as a group that reached state-level infrastructures and professionalism in the art of war.

When associated with strategy, IS' scope or inspiration is limited in the literature to a blind following of Abu Bakr Naji's Management of Savagery guidelines or its 2010 Strategic guidelines. Other authors went moreover, claiming that it did not

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<sup>670</sup> KARATRANTOS, Triantafyllos. *Daesh: The archetype of hybrid terrorist organizations*. 2019. [https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/102\\_2019\\_-WORKING-PAPER-\\_Triantafyllos-Karatrantos-.pdf](https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/102_2019_-WORKING-PAPER-_Triantafyllos-Karatrantos-.pdf)

have any strategy such as Max Abraham saying that “not all strategies are strategic and effective”<sup>671</sup> while mentioning IS. There was a trend in the literature to consider IS behaviour from the perspective of its sole International policy since the Declaration of the Caliphate and its maximalist political behaviour opposed to Al Qaeda pragmatism, without taking into account the more flexible facets of IS pre-2014 Caliphate strategy that this thesis wants to stress. Regarding the debate on the group’s nature, this investigation’s contribution is to advance the view that despite its radical views, eschatological propaganda and maximalist ideology, from 2012-2014 the group had a rational strategic perspective by prioritising its fights and making a cost-benefit calculus to preserve its interests in Iraq. It tackles some study that considered IS only as a millenarist apocalyptic cult. (Berger, 2015; LaPalm, 2014; Schmid, 2015 Mac Cants 2015). These authors did not consider the behaviour of IS as the product of miscalculations, bad strategic choices, or its use eschatology as a propaganda tool but as an irrational strategy to provoke the Apocalypse. By using the scope of LH’s theory and verifying its adherence to many of its axioms, the thesis goes against the ideas that IS’ irrational or maximalist behaviour is occurring structurally.

The maximalist prism of analysis is anachronic while analysing the group’s strategy for the 2011-2014 period. For example, since the proclamation of the Caliphate, it has urged in the name of *Walaah*, all the other groups to pledge their allegiance to the Caliph. Because it elevated its status to the one of “Caliphate”, IS has implicitly proclaimed to be the sole holder of legitimate violence in the Islamic world. Ideologically, it has the obligation of reuniting the Islamic *Ummah* under one banner. Consequently, no groups, no militias or other entity, should be tolerated. This ideological posture is very different from the one during its resurgence and explains the actual inherent conflictive nature of its relations with all the groups who are claiming to represent Political Islam. For that reason, an analysis of IS’ resurgence only through its maximalist strategic turning point taken by 2015 does not describe accurately IS’ behaviour before the July 2014 declaration of the Caliphate. The thesis takes into account these type of shifts by

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<sup>671</sup> Max Abraham, *Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p89

adopting a perspective that tries to understand IS strategy without retroactively drawing its conclusions on IS' rationality.

### **Tactical adherence to LH's principle**

In the tactical study on IS' claimed operations, I verified the first hypothesis that from 2012 to 2014, IS in its operations avoided confrontation in its manoeuvres against the ISF and their allies. Following LH's recommendations on avoiding confrontation with a stronger opponent, it followed guerrilla theorists' main recommendations of mobility, flexibility and avoiding contact with the enemy. For its guerrilla strategy, it took profit from the environment (desert of Anbar, urban areas of Nineveh or highly dense vegetation of Diyala) to conduct hit and run tactics and undiscovered operations. VBIEDS, indirect fire, HBIEDs, and targeted assassinations were the most preferred types of operations against the ISF. In other provinces, following a punishment strategy, it has also deliberately targeted Shia civilians with the massive use of VBIEDs and SVESTs in Baghdad, Diyala, and Salahudeen. Finally, when the phase of territorial control was approaching, I found an increase in confrontational operations such as SVBIEDs used against military fixed points, *inghimassi* operations (storming assaults), armed assaults and SVEST operations precluding the takeover of urban centres. For our case study, the variation of the nature of the operations claimed by the group (ratio confrontational and non-confrontational) was shaping the power balance of the conflict.

The second finding of the investigation is that each province had its operational rhythm and developed its tactical patterns for different strategic objectives. In 2014, the provinces of Anbar, Salahudeen, and Nineveh were ready for a shift from a guerrilla to a conventional type of warfare. This shift in strategy was premature in Baghdad and Diyala. The fact that the group failed in its urban assault in Diyala confirms the province's un-readiness to face an asymmetrical balance of power in the province. The necessity to put pressure on Baghdad may have precipitated the shift of the Diyala province from efficient guerrilla warfare before the spring of 2014 to a failed campaign of urban assaults in the summer of the same year.



## **Strategical adherence to LH's principles**

Before its 2014 urban conquests, the group's operations in 2012 and 2013 were designed to achieve the strategic goal of freeing hundreds of its fighters from Iraqi prisons. By infiltrating prisons, preparing the terrain and deceiving the intelligence enemy forces, the group succeeded in mounting complex military assaults which became a trademark of its future operations. I argued first that the "Breaking the Walls" campaign and the attack on Abu Ghraib prison embraced the majority LH's guidelines for military strategy. Unlike urban assaults, which are strict military operations, the "Breaking the Walls" campaign was hybrid, taking the shape of VBIED waves and sophisticated assaults on prison facilities.

Nevertheless, the same methods and level of preparedness were used in 2014 by the same persons behind these successful military campaigns such as Abu Muhammad Al Suweidawi, who planned the Abu Ghraib attack in 2013 and the continuous assaults on Ramadi in 2014 and 2015. I observed the same strategic pattern which was not present in the literature while comparing the attack on Abu Ghraib prison in 2013 and the offensive in Nineveh a year later. Both operations were on a different scale, creating a dilemma for the defenders. They involved a night attack on the most entrenched and defended target as a diversion in order to facilitate the attack on the less guarded target and put the enemy in a state of indecision.

We can summarise the ingredients of IS' successful urban assaults in Anbar, Nineveh, and Salahudeen by following both LH's advice of dislocation and exploitation<sup>672</sup>. Firstly, the group shifted from a guerrilla to an urban assault strategy at the right time by adjusting its means adequately to its objective. Secondly, they attacked the lines of least expectation and least resistance that had the advantage of confusing the enemy's defensive ripostes. Thirdly, it achieved the dislocation of the enemy's physical equilibrium primarily achieved with frontal attacks using SVBIEDs in order to break the defensive lines. Fourthly, it was achieved at a low cost, while being outnumbered by a combination of

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<sup>672</sup> Liddle Hart , *Strategy*, Meridian Edition 1991, p409

dispersion, concealment, flexibility, mobility, and surprise. Fifthly, the psychological dislocation of ISF was the fruit of years of attrition war, corruption and the decay of minds among ISF in Northern Iraq. This dislocation did not occur in Diyala and Baghdad, where the stake was different for the Iraqi Army and its allies. Finally, these urban assaults were possible because of the group's flexibility in the use of diverse means to achieve its goals (armed assaults, deception, concealment, negotiation). Even though the outcome of IS' operations appeared to be quick (only 72h in Mosul and some days in Salahudeen), it was the product of years of harassment of ISF by IS' cells. When the enemy's psychological dislocation was reached tactically, it has been shrewd and dynamic, taking advantage of the fissures of its opponents and the opportunities on the ground. The literature on IS resurgence considered that Iraqi army condition in 2014 was in such a poor condition in terms of training, capabilities, discipline, and command and did not have the capabilities to confront IS. The contribution of this study and the adherence to LH's axioms observed make this statement not convincing enough. The Iraqi army was in bad shape due to the corruption and weaknesses but IS exploited them with a strategy that goes beyond the points laid out in the 2010 document "the Strategic Plan for the Consolidation of the Political Standing of the Islamic State". Limiting IS' strategy to the following of this strategy can be reductionist, this study confirms the fact that there is room to use other strategic frameworks to understand IS.

From 2012 to 2015 and despite the heterogeneity of its action (VBIED waves, prison breaks, lightning urban assaults, attrition war in an urban environment, guerrilla warfare), the group appeared to stick to a strategic framework that fits LH's guidelines. I found one exception, with the principle of mounting frontal attacks on the enemy's strongest point, which is disapproved by Liddle Hart. This exception can be attributed to the group's culture of sacrifice and the ideological predisposition to underestimate the adversary's power despite being outnumbered and outgunned. Because of its concentrated use of SVBIEDs, IS was not deterred from targeting the most guarded and strongest point of the enemy's defence line. The second exception was the group's assault in Diyala Province, which may have been hasty due to the necessity to pressurise Baghdad

and did not follow many principles of LH's strategy such as adjusting the means to the end and not repeating an attack on the same point.

### **Adherence to LH's Grand Strategy principles**

Finally, the other reason for IS' resurgence in Iraq can be explained by the application of a new strategic framework inspired by COIN strategies with a political and social dimension. The application of Grand Strategy principles towards the Sunni population by adopting a holistic approach coupled with a flexible posture towards its social incubator made it gain the support or the passivity of some tribes. From LH's perspective, we can say that in its post-US withdrawal strategy, there was a genuine conviction from ISI that winning the hearts and minds of the Sunni was vital in order to prosper in Iraq and achieve its strategic goals. The group had a Grand Strategy orchestrated in Iraq by the mobilisation of all the possible means other than the kinetic one and with a vision and a preparation of the after-war period for the Sunni population. This vision was absent from the precedent version of the group under Zarqawi and Al Muhajir (2003-2008), which was more ideological rather than politically and socially driven. Making a pause of its ideological repulsion of other groups, it adopted a pragmatic approach prioritising its targets and not engaging anti-government tribes in Anbar and the Peshmerga for a time in Nineveh. It also promoted a decentralised relationship with the tribes, giving them incentives (financial and resources) and political guarantees (repentance and the possibility of having local militias) to join them. At the same time, the government in Baghdad was following the de-Baathification policy and pursuing many tribal leaders for terrorism charges. IS' flexible posture at a political level offered the group the possibility to take advantage of the grievances of the Sunni population and to redefine the group's priority targets.

If we take into account the framing dimension of the Social Movement theory, IS' propaganda and frames may have also reached frame resonance with its targeted audience. The fact that some of its historical frames were part of Iraqi Spring demands indicates that it channelled in its propaganda the grievances shared by a widespread part of the Sunni Arab population in Iraq. I found the following frames which were part of IS' propaganda well before the spark of the

Sunni protests in Iraq and could resonate among the protestors: the abuses of women in Iraqi prisons, the repression of the Sunni population through the Terrorism Law, the growing Iranian influence and the mistreatment of the Iraqi Sunni as one block by Baghdad. The confluence of these elements could explain the fall of the government's confidence and state institution in the eyes of the Sunni Arab population and the subsequent passive or supportive posture adopted towards IS. The confirmation of IS' self-fulfilling prophecies/frames diffused from 2010 about the state of the Sunni population and the perception of the Sunni Arab community of sharing the same fate in 2014 and being the victim of Baghdad's mistreatment could according to the framing theory, have played a role in increasing the group's frame resonance and mobilising Sunni individuals in their recruitment. The Iraqi Government's violence against protestors was the trigger point that led the group to take advantage of the situation by attracting Sunnis recruits reaching frame resonance that led the group to adhere to the first axiom of LH's of three principles for Grand Strategy, achieving maximum gain with minimum means.

The tribal factor was crucial in explaining IS' demise in 2008 and was also important in explaining its revival six years later. The "neutralisation" (in the sense of making them neutral) of competitive social structures such as tribes or armed groups was as vital to explain the group's ebb and flows in 2014. From the investigation, I found that the end of IS' momentum in its rush from Salahudeen toward Baghdad was due to the fierce resistance coming from Sunni tribes. While IS campaign against the Sahawat is considered by Whiteside (2015) as the most important factor preluding to the resurgence of the group. This finding is not sufficiently stressed out in the literature. This study confirms the importance of the balance of power of IS with the Sahawat by adding a new explanation of the halt of IS' advance, their fierce resistance. The places where IS' June 2014 advance was halted were the ones where Sunni tribes did not adopt the group's narrative and continued to defend their areas, namely, Haditha, Ramadi and Dhuluiyah. The battle of Dhuluiyah appeared to constitute a U-turn point in the conflict before the intervention of the Coalition because it symbolised the place where because IS' sectarian narrative did not function, its advance was halted which had severe strategic consequences. The Jubur tribe, composed of Sunnis,

cooperated with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (a Shia militia part of the PMU and funded by Iran) in Balad and caused the halting of the IS' offensive towards Baghdad's Northern belt while the Iraqi Army was crumbling. Indeed, never presented in the literature and by commentators, IS' offensive because of recent and spectacular nature did not attract much of analysis in order to explain it. Even though Coalition airpower is said to have halted IS' momentum in Iraq by mid-August 2014, the group's impossibility to junction its forces in the triangle North of Baghdad, Diyala and South of Salahudeem represented the real end of IS' offensive to pressure on Baghdad.

One of the primary limits to IS' adherence to LH's grand strategy principles was its extreme use of violence and its ideological and maximalist vision of international relations. While IS uses strategic violence to shock and also deter, LH considers that excessive violence is unproductive. The resistance of the enemy is inversely proportional to the level of violence imposed on him. The more IS was violent and publicised its crimes against its enemies, the more resistance it faced. Shia troops defending Baghdad and their holy cities found a determination to fight the ISF which was lacking in Sunni Arab provinces. IS applied LH's indirect approach guidelines only for its policy towards the Sunni population but not with other populations or at the international level. We shall note that IS understood that its failure in 2008 came from the worsening of its relations with the Sunni population and its subsequent strategy applied later was directed towards them. Resilient organisations are those who react to disturbance by changing their structure and behaviour. This study argues that this change of strategy toward the Sunni population was paramount in explaining the group's resilience first and resurgence years later with the addition of external factors.

What are the implications of IS' following of most of LH's principles? The conclusion of the thesis is that IS had a strategy at multiple levels and that its adherence to many of LH's axioms gave the group flexibility in balancing the reality of the political terrain and its ideological aspirations, something that is neglected in the literature while explaining its resurgence. It reinforces previous researches stating that it did not constitute a loose group of unconnected military commanders but rather a hierarchical, disciplined group with a military doctrine

applied in different battlefields on a different size. This military doctrine deployed requires centralised leadership decision-making and risk-taking, with orders and resources allocated by leaders. The group's reputation of militarism, the Iraqi Baathist army background of some of its military commanders, their cult of violence and dogmatism did not make its adherence to principles calling for more flexibility, a given fact. Especially when LH's vision of the indirect approach is not limited to military affairs but has a broader perspective. The adherence of IS to these principles may confirm the substantial gain in professionalism, experience and strategic vision the group benefited from through its military leaders with previous military experience (Hajji Bakr, Suweidawi, Bilawi ...). Despite having graduated in an army, which did not apply much of LH's theory, they have been keen to adapt their political behaviour and military strategy to their new context. IS cannot be reduced to small operatives, its maximalist rhetoric or the savagery of its propaganda videos as its profound gain in professionalism and aptitude cannot be dismissed. It confirmed that regarding its military warfare, IS' resilience was possible because it is a "learning organisation" (Fishman, 2017) as described in the literature as an entity that facilitates the learning of its members and continuously transforms itself. The result of this thesis reinforces the state-level structure reached by the group in 2014 thanks to the quality of its human capital. It also argues that IS can borrow and apply ideas coming from different backgrounds and not necessarily only Islamic ones.

As a military doctrine taking into account military and non-kinetic interactions, IS' unique pattern of behaviour combining flexibility at the strategic level with an overall adherence to LH's axioms and a limited but still discriminatory adherence to its Grand strategy principles couldn't have been better grasped by any other strategic theory than the indirect approach. LH's approach has proved to be relevant and well suited by using different dimensions of analysis avoiding oversimplifications surrounding IS' behaviour and strategy. This thesis came to counterbalance pre-conceived idea on the group, such as its reduction to a mob without other strategies than taking advantage of political crisis and sectarianism. It brings more nuance to its frozen classification as the most extreme and maximalist actor in the Jihadi landscape contrarily to a more moderate Al Qaeda wing, which is part of Al Qaeda's communication and storytelling.

### **A comeback to the 2012 situation?**

From IS' perspective, the blow of the 2017-2018 military defeat compared to the 2007-2010 defeat was different in Iraq. In both cases, the group was driven out of cities, but while in 2007 the main driving force was internal with the group's rejection by its social incubator, in 2017 the main driving force was external with the utter destruction of IS' controlled cities which were bombarded into dust. After \$14.3 billion was spent on more than 24,000 airstrikes, which destroyed most of the urban areas of Iraq (Ramadi and Mosul especially) and Syria (Al-Bab, Raqqa) the group was considered as defeated. We shall see if a future strategic change of vision and gain of flexibility will be applied to its international relations and the treatment of the non-Sunni population that Al Qaeda with its affiliates or Jolani's pragmatic experience in Idlib appears to have adopted during recent years. Both movements have the same ultimate objective of establishing through violence a transnational Islamic State applying tactical and military principles defended by LH but have a different approach regarding Grand Strategy principles affecting their methodology. Al Qaeda's new strategy was the fruit of introspection made by Seif el Adl and Al Suri, while from IS' perspective there was no introspection regarding its political and strategic choice that led to the loss of its territories in 2017. At the time of writing this conclusion, the perspective of an internal debate on these issues is unlikely. Military defeats are so far interpreted as God's test and punishment for members' deviation from the right part and a way to separate evil from good. For that reason, the main internal debate among the group remains theological on the issue of Takfir as part of the group's quest for ideological purity. Nevertheless, it could have strategic and political implications in the case of adopting extreme postures with the risk of opening the door to the broad use of Takfir that could jeopardise IS' flexible policy toward the Sunni population, further increase its maximalist political behaviour and lead to internal divisions.

Regarding the possibility of a new resurgence of IS, reports have emerged that despite the territorial losses, IS was still an "organised force with around 17 000

fighters in Iraq”<sup>673</sup>. While retreating to their historical safe havens (Hawijah Mountains, Hamrin Lake, Anbar, and the Jazeera desert), they were still maintaining an organization and an “intact collective discipline” transitioning to insurgency and operating mostly by night in rural areas of Central Iraq (Kirkuk, Salahuddin and Diyala). This transition to insurgency and the group’s resilience can be verified by a quick overview of the group’s operational activities. From IS’ figures <sup>674</sup> and using the provincial division used in 2012-2013, in August 2018 IS claimed<sup>675</sup> responsibility for 21 operations in Anbar (close to March 2012 figures), 32 in Nineveh (its lowest was 64 in January 2012), 38 in Diyala (figures of February 2012), 39 in Salahudeen and Northern Baghdad (Beginning of 2012) and 14 in Baghdad (lowest figure in March 2012). Regarding the volume of operations claimed by the group, its August 2018 figures came back to the start of 2012. The group could somehow maintain an operational presence in the provinces which made it resilient but IS’ own figures should mitigate the threat of a short-term resurgence of the group comparable to the one of 2014. Further research would be necessary to determine in detail the type of operations and their confrontational nature in order to have a better picture of IS’ capabilities in 2018 and 2019 compared to 2012.

In conclusion, after reaching its apex in 2014-2015, IS’ ideological appeal has suffered important blows, both from the outside with the demise of its “physical Caliphate” and from the inside with the rise of internal divisions. Facing those challenges, the group has been adaptive, resistant and tried to build political victory from military defeats. The fierce resistance showed in urban centres in Mosul and Raqqa sent a message to its constituency to prove its supposed moral superiority against rivals while defending symbolic places. While at the same

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<sup>673</sup> The figure of 17000 may be inflated by counting the fighters and their entourage and families See <http://undocs.org/S/2018/705>

<sup>674</sup> For episodes <https://jihadology.net/2018/08/30/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-harvest-of-the-soldiers-5/>

<sup>675</sup> See Annex 3



time, it retreated from other areas to avoid unnecessary losses and preserve its resources such as in Hawijah, Deir Ezzor and Al Qaim.

The group's ideology has demonstrated to be fluid, evolutionary, and hence resilient. Its propaganda production adapted to the new stakes. Its latest productions described its territorial losses as evidence of God's trial (*ibtillia*), promoted patience (*sabr*) as the right attitude against hardship, and explained the depletion of its ranks as God's way to purge away the deserters, traitors and extremists in the necessary quest towards theological purity. The same applies to its military strategy, IS has been fluid in changing in its tactics and methods to go back to urban terrorism, rural guerrilla waiting the right moment for semi-conventional warfare.

Therefore, in spite of its difficulties, IS will probably continue to inspire hope through propaganda and maintain a military profile mirroring its 2009-2012 regression phase in Iraq. We saw how in two years the group was able to exploit a deteriorating political and social environment to surge its operations. The internally displaced Sunni population's fate remains uncertain and the grievances of the population have worsened. Tensions within the Shia camps between pro-Iranians and pro-US after the elections and widespread protests in the south against corruption and lack of services could weaken the anti-IS front in the future. IS tried to take advantage of these protests by sabotaging electric lines in Iraq to further harm the population's faith in the government.<sup>676</sup> To pressurise Baghdad, PMU started to retreat from Sunni areas such as Nineveh where they were stationed<sup>677</sup>.

Out of necessity and facing a tremendous coalition against it, its current global strategy seems to follow Abu Mosab Al Suri's general strategy based on "open fronts" and independent actions worldwide. After 9/11, Al Suri envisioned jihad

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<sup>676</sup>"Kirkuk-Diyala electricity lines sabotaged again; Iraq blames 'terrorism'", Rudaw, 22, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/020820182>

<sup>677</sup> Mustafaa Saadoun, "Will Iraqi Shiite militias withdraw from Sunni areas?", Al Monitor, 22/08/2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/08/iraq-sunni-shiite-pmu-sectarianism.html>

as an order and not an organisation (*nidham* and not *tandhim*) structured to avoid destruction as a leaderless jihadi network with a concentration of thought and a decentralisation of the execution. The fall of the caliphate by the hands of the International coalition may also push the group's strategist towards Al Suri's recommendation of destroying the international order before re-establishing the caliphate. This may have counteracted IS' pre caliphate top-down organisational structure and its aspiration to create a state in a territory but may constitute a necessary evolution to avoid destruction facing a much more advanced military international coalition. However, after the losses of the territories it controlled in Iraq, the group's presence in zones of conflicts and failed states from which "the exhaustion phase" could evolve to a state-building experience like in Iraq in 2005 and 2014 has given the group new areas where it could reproduce its model (Sinai, Libya, Northern Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen, South Philippines and Khorasan). In case it decides to decentralize it could evolve from the 3 rings models developed by ISW<sup>678</sup> to describe IS' post-Caliphate global strategy divided between: "the centre" in Syria and Iraq, "the near Abroad" referring the Muslim world from Morocco to South Philippines and the 'Far Abroad' (the West and the cyberspace), where it wage sporadic attacks. Each of the provinces where it is trying to reproduce its model could evolve to be local centres where it tries to build a sanctuary and expand its influence. These provinces will continue to wage low-intensity warfare waiting for a geopolitical opportunity such as a revolution, a civil war, a weak central government or a regional conflict. Its propaganda, the resources allocated to its affiliates and the designation of a province of Iraq regrouping all the sub-regional provinces in its operational reports in 2018 seems to confirm this geographical decentralization process of the Iraqi group. It also raises the question about the possible exportation of IS' military strategy and warfare to its affiliates around the world.

IS' current state as an insurgency in Iraq raises more questions about what will be the strategy of its leaders in case of a return to the cities. A maximalist revanchist approach with a general *Takfir* of the Sunnis who did not side with the

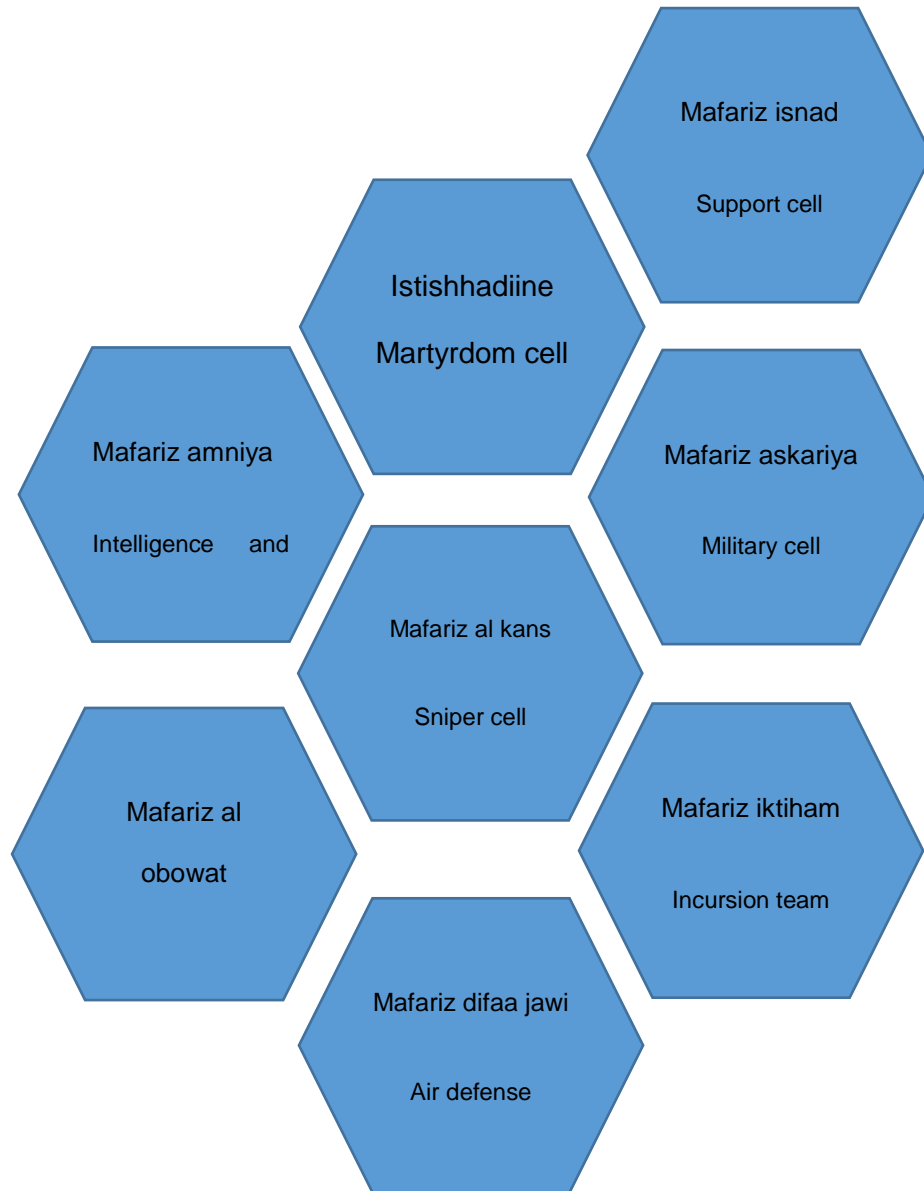
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<sup>678</sup> Richard Barret, "The Islamic State goes global", CTC sentinel , Volume 08 Issue 11, November December 2015, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-islamic-state-goes-global/>

group or the continuation of a pragmatic and inclusive policy towards Sunnis like in 2014? What will be its attitude particularly towards tribes, especially the ones that once pledged allegiance and changed their camp afterwards? IS' capacity to take cities and hold them depends largely on the ability to manoeuvre without fearing air attacks. Until when will Western support to Baghdad continue? What would be the consequence in Iraq of a regional conflict between Iran and its allies and Israel, the US and the some Arab States? These questions may determine IS' future capabilities in Iraq that oscillate between the ability to nurturing tensions (Nikaya) and a consolidation (Tamkin) after a new destabilisation of the Iraqi state.

# VIII- Appendix

## Annexe 1



Cells illustrating IS' military and intelligence structure identified from IS' operations claims.

Annexe 2 Tables categorizing IS' claimed operation in 5 provinces of Iraq from November 2011 to April 2014

<i>NBS</i>	confrontational	Non-confrontational	total
<i>Nov-11</i>	2	36	38
<i>Dec-11</i>	2	31	33
<i>Jan-12</i>	2	22	24
<i>Feb-12</i>	4	22	26
<i>Mar-12</i>	4	42	46
<i>Apr-12</i>	2	38	40
<i>May-12</i>	8	71	79
<i>Jun-12</i>	8	52	60
<i>Jul-12</i>	17	62	79
<i>Aug-12</i>	7	48	55
<i>Sep-12</i>	10	64	74
<i>Oct-12</i>	7	31	38
<i>Nov-12</i>	4	50	54
<i>Dec-12</i>	9	59	68
<i>Jan-13</i>	7	35	42
<i>Feb-13</i>	10	85	95
<i>Mar-13</i>	11	90	101
<i>Apr-13</i>	44	102	146
<i>May-13</i>	19	126	145
<i>Jun-13</i>	21	152	173
<i>Jul-13</i>	7	111	118
<i>Aug-13</i>	11	143	154
<i>Sep-13</i>	35	172	207
<i>Oct-13</i>	28	152	180

<i>Nov-13</i>	33	137	170
<i>Dec-13</i>	33	113	146
<i>Jan-14</i>	71	229	300
<i>Feb-14</i>	35	209	244
<i>Mar-14</i>	37	233	270
<i>Apr-14</i>	41	277	318

<u>Anbar</u>	<u>Confrontational</u>	<u>Non confrontational</u>	<u>total</u>
<u>Nov-11</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>62</u>
<u>Dec-11</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>Jan-12</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>31</u>
<u>Feb-12</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>50</u>
<u>Mar-12</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>20</u>
<u>Apr-12</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>54</u>
<u>May-12</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>74</u>
<u>Jun-12</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>44</u>
<u>Jul-12</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>82</u>	<u>97</u>
<u>Aug-12</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>57</u>
<u>Sep-12</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>55</u>
<u>Oct-12</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>44</u>
<u>Nov-12</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>50</u>
<u>Dec-12</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>62</u>
<u>Jan-13</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>50</u>
<u>Feb-13</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>66</u>
<u>Mar-13</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>69</u>
<u>Apr-13</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>124</u>	<u>138</u>
<u>May-13</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>93</u>	<u>117</u>
<u>Jun-13</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>83</u>	<u>106</u>
<u>Jul-13</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>73</u>	<u>92</u>
<u>Aug-13</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>72</u>	<u>98</u>
<u>Sep-13</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>90</u>	<u>111</u>
<u>Oct-13</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>132</u>
<u>Nov-13</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>114</u>	<u>139</u>

<b><u>Dec-13</u></b>	<u>20</u>	<u>53</u>	<u>73</u>
<b><u>Jan-14</u></b>	<u>71</u>	<u>229</u>	<u>300</u>
<b><u>Feb-14</u></b>	<u>51</u>	<u>209</u>	<u>260</u>
<b><u>Mar-14</u></b>	<u>61</u>	<u>267</u>	<u>328</u>
<b><u>Apr-14</u></b>	<u>97</u>	<u>340</u>	<u>437</u>



**Nineveh**

confrontational

Non-  
confrontational

total

<b>Nov-11</b>	37	97	134
<b>Dec-11</b>	37	66	103
<b>Jan-12</b>	20	44	64
<b>Feb-12</b>	50	89	139
<b>Mar-12</b>	20	74	94
<b>Apr-12</b>	43	98	141
<b>May-12</b>	24	86	110
<b>Jun-12</b>	28	99	127
<b>Jul-12</b>	51	225	276
<b>Aug-12</b>	18	158	176
<b>Sep-12</b>	31	146	177
<b>Oct-12</b>	16	134	150
<b>Nov-12</b>	18	102	120
<b>Dec-12</b>	13	123	136
<b>Jan-13</b>	17	115	132
<b>Feb-13</b>	12	159	171
<b>Mar-13</b>	32	174	206
<b>Apr-13</b>	62	178	240
<b>May-13</b>	52	242	294
<b>Jun-13</b>	44	245	289
<b>Jul-13</b>	66	316	382
<b>Aug-13</b>	46	254	300
<b>Sep-13</b>	29	225	254

<b>Oct-13</b>	22	213	235
<b>Nov-13</b>	36	249	285
<b>Dec-13</b>	41	212	253
<b>Jan-14</b>	133	343	476
<b>Feb-14</b>	126	372	498
<b>Mar-14</b>	75	331	406
<b>Apr-14</b>	56	349	405

**Diyala**      confrontational      Non-      total  
confrontational

<b>Nov-11</b>	0	28	28
<b>Dec-11</b>	1	32	33
<b>Jan-12</b>	4	29	33
<b>Feb-12</b>	5	32	37
<b>Mar-12</b>	11	70	81
<b>Apr-12</b>	8	40	48
<b>May-12</b>	18	81	99
<b>Jun-12</b>	3	56	59
<b>Jul-12</b>	10	30	40
<b>Aug-12</b>	8	36	44
<b>Sep-12</b>	3	33	36
<b>Oct-12</b>	3	76	79
<b>Nov-12</b>	1	61	62
<b>Dec-12</b>	5	87	92
<b>Jan-13</b>	9	59	68
<b>Feb-13</b>	16	62	78
<b>Mar-13</b>	7	70	77
<b>Apr-13</b>	4	60	64
<b>May-13</b>	19	90	109
<b>Jun-13</b>	5	53	58
<b>Jul-13</b>	9	94	103
<b>Aug-13</b>	11	60	71
<b>Sep-13</b>	9	94	103

<b>Oct-13</b>	11	60	71
<b>Nov-13</b>	18	45	63
<b>Dec-13</b>	15	96	111
<b>Jan-14</b>	12	52	64
<b>Feb-14</b>	20	111	131
<b>Mar-14</b>	25	75	100
<b>Apr-14</b>	8	69	77

<b>Baghdad</b>	<b>confrontational</b>	<b>Non-confrontational</b>	<b>total</b>
<b>Nov-11</b>	0	43	43
<b>Dec-11</b>	3	27	30
<b>Jan-12</b>	1	39	40
<b>Feb-12</b>	1	19	20
<b>Mar-12</b>	2	12	14
<b>Apr-12</b>	0	25	25
<b>May-12</b>	3	42	45
<b>Jun-12</b>	0	23	23
<b>Jul-12</b>	8	42	50
<b>Aug-12</b>	3	34	37
<b>Sep-12</b>	1	30	31
<b>Oct-12</b>	1	17	18
<b>Nov-12</b>	1	23	24
<b>Dec-12</b>	0	39	39
<b>Jan-13</b>	1	38	39
<b>Feb-13</b>	1	38	39
<b>Mar-13</b>	4	40	44
<b>Apr-13</b>	0	20	20
<b>May-13</b>	1	42	43
<b>Jun-13</b>	3	11	14
<b>Jul-13</b>	10	10	20
<b>Aug-13</b>	4	40	44
<b>Sep-13</b>	3	23	26

<b>Oct-13</b>	3	27	30
<b>Nov-13</b>	2	18	20
<b>Dec-13</b>	3	26	29
<b>Jan-14</b>	4	25	29
<b>Feb-14</b>	2	39	41
<b>Mar-14</b>	5	35	40
<b>Apr-14</b>	9	35	44

Annexe 3: Operations claimed by IS in Iraq in August 2018

	<b>Week 1</b>	<b>Week 2</b>	<b>Week 3</b>	<b>Week 4</b>	<b>Week 5</b>	<b>total</b>
<b>Kirkuk</b>	6	7	20	23	15	71
<b>Diyala</b>	4	2	10	10	12	38
<b>Anbar Fallujah</b>	0	2	4	4	11	21
<b>Nineveh</b>	1	7	9	11	4	32
<b>Baghdad</b>	1	2	4	7	0	14
<b>SNB</b>	6	15	14	4	0	39
<b>South</b>	0	0	0	4	0	4
<b>Total</b>	19	37	64	67	47	234

Annexe 4 Iraq Map<sup>679</sup>



<sup>679</sup> Source : [https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle\\_east\\_and\\_asia/iraq\\_pol-2009.jpg](https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/iraq_pol-2009.jpg)



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