



Predicting the Rise of the Islamic State

September 29, 2014

For inquiries contact press@understandingwar.org

FORECASTS AND WARNINGS

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides accurate geostrategic forecasts and advanced warning of growing threats. ISW analysts have accurately forecasted the political fragmentation of Iraq and the return of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), now the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), since 2011. ISW analysts have correctly predicted the origins, pathways, methods, and aims of ISIS's return.

ISW conducts strategic forecasting as a core intellectual contribution to foreign policy. ISW's leaders believe that strategic surprise can be averted by monitoring the trajectories of complex problems over time, even from unclassified information. Over the last 18 months, ISW has published a number of forecasts that anticipated the resurgence of AQI, the devolution of the Iraqi Security Forces, and the emergence of the ISIS campaign to control territory inside Iraq and Syria. This document is a compilation of forecasts made by ISW's analysts that have come true. Strategic forecasting does not presume that complex situations will always unfold as predicted. ISW strives to apply concrete knowledge of the present in order to deliver insight about the future. ISW hopes that this policy makers can use these insights in order to take a proactive rather than a reactive posture to emerging crisis situations and prevent their escalation.

ISW has maintained its Iraq program, with its focus on al-Qaeda in Iraq, because "[Iraq is at the center of two of the most pressing national security challenges facing America today—the growth of Iranian power and the fight against al Qaeda and its affiliates](#)," as ISW President Kimberly Kagan and Deputy Director Marisa Sullivan explained in November 2011.

Sunni Insurgency

ISW analyst Ramzy Mardini wrote in December 2011 that [Iraq was likely to fragment](#) after U.S. Forces withdrew.

Deputy Director Marisa Sullivan noted in February 2012 that Iraqi Prime Minister [Maliki was setting conditions for the return of a Sunni insurgency](#) by marginalizing Sunni political leaders and the body politic.

[http://www.understandingwar.org/
press@understandingwar.org](http://www.understandingwar.org/press@understandingwar.org)

ISW analysts predicted that AQI would [exploit Iraq's Sunni protest movement](#) against Prime Minister Maliki to regain power and terrain in Iraq, noting rapidly escalating violence trends in January and February 2013.

Analyst Sam Wyer noted in February 2013, "The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the umbrella group of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and other radical groups will likely find more opportunities to exploit widespread disillusionment about Sunni political marginalization, [increasing the potential for violent confrontation](#)."

The Sunni protest movement [transformed into an armed insurgency](#) after the Iraqi Security Forces assaulted a protest camp in Hawijah, ISW's Ahmed Ali observed in May 2013.

[AQI began to hijack the protest movement](#) in October 2013, when it entered and flew its flags in the protest camp in Ramadi, a location that had hitherto remained peaceful. Ahmed Ali noted this important inflection as soon as it occurred.

By early April 2014, Research Director Jessica Lewis noted indicators of Sunni tribal cooperation with ISIS in Anbar, stating that ISIS was "[cultivating relations with the tribes](#), suggesting that cooperation with the Tribal military councils may now be underway."

Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria

ISW analysts have highlighted AQI's revival as a terrorist group since August 2012. They noted that AQI aspired to [recapture its safe havens in Iraq, free prisoners, and conduct terrorist attacks against the United States](#).

They noted that the group had [successfully returned to its former safe havens](#) and had reinvigorated violence along [traditional fault lines](#) by August 2012.

AQI had declared a [formal campaign of terrorism](#) to achieve its objectives, as ISW observed in September 2012.

ISW analysts, noting the presence of AQI among jihadists in Syria, argued in September 2012 that [AQI would operate across the borders of Iraq and Syria](#) because the organization did not respect artificial state boundaries. They argued that the group would retain its focus on Iraq.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's Ambition for an Islamic State

Kagan wrote about [AQI's resurgence in Iraq and the Sunni insurgency in Mosul](#) on July 1, 2013.

"Sectarian war has reignited in Iraq. Iranian-backed Shia militias have remobilized, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is conducting an intensive and escalating campaign of spectacular attacks against Shia targets, and some of the former Baathist insurgents are staging an effective campaign against the Iraqi Security Forces in the vicinity of Mosul. "

ISW's Jessica Lewis assessed in July 2013 that the group's leader [Abu Bakr al Baghdadi literally aimed to declare an Islamic State](#): "When al Qaeda in Iraq last enjoyed this operational advantage, it chose to announce the birth of the Islamic State of Iraq and to appoint emirs and Shura councils in every province. This historical parallel places Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's recent announcements of his envisioned Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in the literal context of a deliberate campaign to establish governance over areas in Iraq and Syria."

ISW analysts predicted on August 1, 2013 that [ISIS aimed to consolidate power in urban centers](#) in northern and eastern Syria and might attempt to establish an Islamic State there. "Their oppressive and often brutal imposition of control on population centers points to an agenda focused not on freeing the people from the regime, but on carving out and consolidating a base of power." ISW published a map of its presence in Syria on August 1, 2013.

Jessica Lewis published evidence of [ISIS's further advance toward Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Baghdad](#) on November 15, 2013.

Jessica Lewis and the ISW Iraq Team analyzed AQI operations in Anbar Province in Iraq at the end of 2013 and into the first weeks of 2014. They assessed that ["AQI seeks control of cities"](#) and warned that reinforcement of Anbar Province by the Iraqi Army could "leave other critical areas such as Baghdad more vulnerable to AQI."

On January 5, 2014, Ahmed Ali wrote that [AQI had seized control of much of Fallujah](#) and predicted that "the contest for control of Fallujah will almost certainly be a violent struggle."

In March 2014, ISW tracked the online presence of Wilayats (provincial governorates) and surmised that they "confirm the [intent of ISIS to establish alternative governance structures](#) inside of Iraq." This assessment foreshadowed the formal announcement of ISIS's Caliphate, but demonstrated how ISIS aimed to consolidate territory within Iraq. At the time, ISW identified Twitter accounts for the following Wilayats:

- ISIS Wilayat Diyala
- ISIS Wilayat Kirkuk
- ISIS Wilayat Ninewa
- ISIS Wilayat Northern Baghdad
- ISIS Wilayat Anbar
- ISIS Wilayat Salah ad Din
- ISIS Wilayat in the South (likely referring to northern Babel)

Also in March 2014, ISW noted that [ISIS Wilayats were also active in Syria](#) and wrote that "it is important therefore to note that ISIS is not operating solely as a military organization in Iraq."

A Terrorist Army

Lewis wrote in September 2013 that the resurgent al-Qaeda in Iraq [constituted a terrorist army](#). “AQI’s campaign showcases the depth of a multi-echelon military organization with well-established command and control that can design and implement coordinated attacks across the whole of Iraq.”

In May, ISW’s Alex Bilger analyzed ISIS’s annual reports and confirmed ISW’s earlier assessments that the group has a disciplined military command and functions [“as a military rather than as a terrorist network. A counter-terrorism strategy that does not take these characteristics into consideration will under-estimate and fail to defeat this enemy.”](#)

Mosul: The Operational Goal

Lewis assessed in October 2013 that AQI aimed to [gain territorial control of Ninewa province, particularly by degrading the Iraqi Security Forces in Mosul](#).

Lewis noted [AQI activity in Mosul](#) in November 2013.

ISW’s Iraq Team warned that it [could no longer monitor AQI activity or ISF control in Mosul](#) because the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham had targeted journalists for assassination, imposing an effective media blackout.

ISW assessed in January 2014 that AQI or JRTN were establishing control of neighborhoods within Mosul and noted that [“Iraqi Security Forces do not control the city. While all eyes are focused on Anbar, it is essential to observe warning signs of AQI’s next campaign objective.”](#)

The Collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces

Ahmed Ali warned in August 2013 that [“The ISF is overstretched and cannot adequately provide security throughout the country,”](#) noting a manpower crisis indicated by defections, unit collapses, resignations of senior leaders, the granting of a general amnesty for soldiers who had left their units without leave, the government’s attempt to mobilize new tribal forces, and the deployment of units from southern Iraq to frontlines in the north, center, and west. He noted in September that the Iraqi Security Forces were planning to [incorporate Iranian-backed Shi’a militias](#) into their formal military structures, another sign of how the government planned to recover lost manpower.

Lewis noted in September 2013 that the Iraqi Security Forces were fighting AQI in Baghdad at the expense of the province. “These operations, furthermore, have [limited potential to counter AQI because the ISF is not effectively pursuing the organization throughout its depth inside Iraq.](#)”

Lewis warned after the fall of Fallujah in January 2014, “Certainly, [the Iraqi Army cannot repel al Qaeda alone.](#)”

Analyzing AQI gains in Anbar Province in Iraq in January 2014, Lewis and the ISW Iraq Team [noted signs of desertion among the ISF and the Iraqi Police](#). They forecasted that “other local security forces operating in the province may desert, units may dissolve, and individuals and units may join the tribal militias.”

In response to AQI’s January 2014 gains in Anbar Province, the Iraqi government repositioned ISF from southern Iraq to Anbar in the west. Jessica Lewis [depicted these movements in a map](#) and warned that “the deployment of these units will likely generate gaps and allow AQI freedom of maneuver.”

Immediate Lead-Up to the Fall of Mosul

ISW issued multiple Warning Intelligence Reports on the dangers posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the collapsing situation of the Iraqi Security Forces in Anbar on [April 4, 2014](#); [April 9, 2014](#); and [April 15, 2014](#); ISIS’s encroachment on Baghdad on [April 24, 2014](#); the return of the Islamic State to Diyala in mid-[April, 2014](#); and a major, multi-front assault on [June 7, 2014](#).