

THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND THE “DESTROYING THE WALLS” CAMPAIGN

Since the withdrawal of U.S. Forces from Iraq in December 2011, the rate and lethality of attacks against civilian targets have steadily risen.¹ Most notably, there have been seven major attack waves, defined here as a series of simultaneous and coordinated attacks that target at least 10 cities within one day.² The attacks targeted a combination of security posts, government facilities, and Shi’ite shrines and neighborhoods. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an umbrella organization formed in 2006 for many Sunni insurgency groups including al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), has claimed credit for a large majority of these attacks.³ This summer has seen a further alarming development with the announcement of ISI’s “Destroying the Walls” campaign.

On July 21, 2012, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISI, announced the start of the “Destroying the Walls” campaign in his first online statement since he took control of ISI in 2010.⁴ Al-Baghdadi stressed the “start of a new phase of jihad” in Iraq in a rallying cry to “refuel” the battle with additional Sunni supporters.⁵ Two days later, a massive wave of attacks struck over 20 Iraqi cities and left more than 115 dead. These attacks marked the beginning of a new era of coordinated attack waves orchestrated by ISI throughout Iraq. The three major attack waves executed since start of the “Destroying the Walls” campaign outmatch previous waves in terms of overall casualties, attack intervals, and geographic range.

DESTROYING THE WALLS

In recent statements, ISI outlined two main priorities for the new campaign: First, to secure “releasing of Muslim captives everywhere” and second, to “dominate the territory” that was previously controlled by ISI in 2006.⁶ To accomplish these objectives, ISI launched a campaign to target “the operational joints of the Safavids,” a reference to Maliki’s Shi’a-dominated government. They called for the targeting of the “staff, followers, and supporters” of Maliki’s rule, to include state “judges and interrogators” as well as other Shi’ite government officials, and the Iraqi security apparatus.⁷ In effect, however, ISI’s “Destroying the Walls” campaign has consistently targeted Shi’ite civilians along with security posts and other government targets.

The “Destroying the Walls” campaign indicates the degree to which ISI has grown in its ability to plan, coordinate, and execute attacks since the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The three major attack waves since the beginning of the campaign have occurred at a regular

24 day interval, which is a significant rate increase as compared to the previous four attack waves in 2012 that were separated on average by 37 days. Furthermore, the newest attack wave expanded geographically from Mosul to Basra. The September 9 bombings were particularly significant as the first ISI attacks to strike the predominately Shi’a areas of southern Iraq since the ISI suicide bombings in Nasiriyah and Basra in January 2012. Furthermore, the September 9 attack wave demonstrates a nationwide command and control capability to synchronize attacks from Mosul and Kirkuk in the north to Basra in the south.⁸



FIGURE 1 | WAVE ONE - JULY 23

The July 23 attacks killed over 115 people in and around at least 20 cities in over 30 coordinated attacks that struck the central and northern provinces of Iraq.⁹ The attacks were predominately vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) with a few instances of small arms fire at security checkpoints. While the exact timing of each attack is difficult to determine, most appear to have occurred during the morning hours of the day.¹⁰ This would indicate a high level of coordination to detonate 30 VBIEDs within this short period. The geographic concentration of the July 23 attack, like that of the first four attack waves in 2012, centered on Baghdad, Diyala province, Kirkuk city, and Mosul, areas that had been significant ISI strongholds during its peak in 2006.¹¹ They are also areas that can be easily resourced through use of historic AQI supply lines radiating out from Baghdad to outlying cities such as Taji, Baquba, and al-Khalis. The July 23 attack wave was quickly followed by a written statement titled “An announcement on the First Wave of the ‘Destroying the Walls’ Operations” in which ISI claimed responsibility for the “simultaneous and coordinated jihadist operations” that “swept the length of the country.”¹²

concentrated in Baghdad, Baquba, and areas west of the capital near Ramadi. Based on news reporting from that day, most of the attacks took place between 10am and 2pm with additional VBIED attacks reported later in the evening. It does not appear that ISI claimed credit for this wave of attacks, though the method and distribution is consistent with the “Destroying the Walls” campaign; however, on the same day, ISI released a video detailing its March 5 raid on Iraqi security forces in Haditha. The video showed ISI members successfully ambushing five security checkpoints dressed as ISF, disarming the policemen, and then executing 27 of them with silenced weapons.¹⁴ While it is unclear why ISI neglected to claim credit for the August 16 attack, the video clearly projects an image of dominance over Iraqi security forces and may downplay the targeting of Shi’ite civilians.

The September 9 attack wave killed more than 100 people in over 30 coordinated attacks in at least 18 cities. Based on media reporting, most of the attacks occurred between 9:30 am and 2:30 pm, with additional VBIED attacks in Baghdad in the evening.



FIGURE 2 | WAVE TWO - AUGUST 16

On August 16, a second major wave of attacks killed over 100 people in at least 19 cities throughout central and northern Iraq.¹³ As on July 23, the majority of attacks were VBIEDs with some small arms fire at security checkpoints. Similar to the July 23 wave, the attacks were focused in Baghdad and the surrounding belts and in the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul. These attacks, however, were less extended into Diyala province and instead were more densely

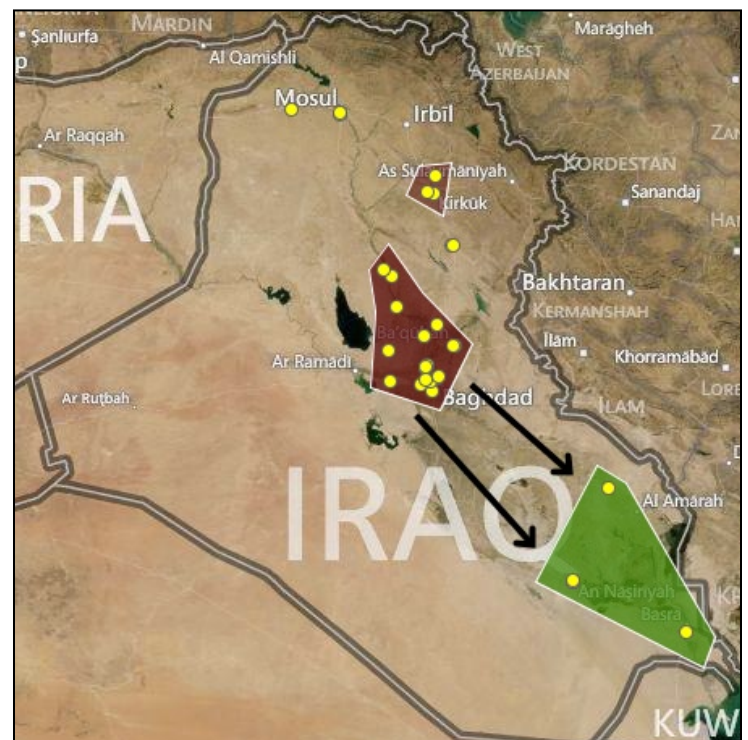


FIGURE 3 | WAVE THREE - SEPTEMBER 9

While maintaining a concentration around Baghdad and Kirkuk city, this attack wave expanded south to Basra, Misan, and Dhi-Qar provinces. For the first time as part of an ISI coordinated attack wave, bombings occurred in or around the cities of Nasiriyah, Basra, and Amarah. This southern expansion of ISI’s attack waves demonstrates a concerted effort by ISI to project its capabilities deep into Shi’ite territory, an area which has recently had “so few

security incidents . . . that insecurity has very little impact on civilian life.”¹⁵ While the recent attacks may not change this fact, it may, nonetheless, point to an expansion of ISI capacity regarding its freedom of movement throughout the country and ability to coordinate attacks that span the length of the country. The September 9 attack wave displayed ISI’s ability not just to detonate a single bomb in a southern city as it did last January, but now to detonate multiple bombs in multiple southern cities as part of a larger attack wave. In total, 30 people were killed in the south by two car bombs at the Shi’ite shrine of Ali al-Sharqi outside al-Amarah, two car bombs in the city of al-Nasiriyah, and one car bomb in the Sadrist stronghold of al-Qibla, Basra. A statement released by ISI on September 10 confirmed their responsibility for this “new wave” of attacks and reaffirmed its commitment to freeing prisoners.¹⁶

Attack Wave Intervals

The “Destroying the Walls” campaign marked a noticeable decrease in the time between attack waves. The average time between the seven major attack waves of 2012 is 33 days, indicating it takes ISI just over one month to rearm, plan, and carry out their next attack wave. The average time between the first four waves prior to “Destroying the Walls” was 37 days. By comparison, the time between the each of the three waves since the June 21 statement is exactly 24 days, indicating that the new attack waves are occurring 35% faster than the original four waves. While the overall level of violence in Iraq may differ across provinces and cities,¹⁷ the geographic and temporal expansions of ISI attack waves suggest an increase in ISI freedom of movement, capability, and coordination as it adapts to the changed security environment of post-withdrawal Iraq.

GOALS

As a Salafist group, ISI’s endgame focuses on establishing an “Islamic state” in Iraq that would not “accept a rule or constitution other than the rule of Allah” that “does not recognize the artificial borders and a nationality except Islam.”¹⁸ As such, one would expect ISI to continue to target Maliki’s government, the Shi’a population, and Iraqi security forces in an effort to collapse the state. Al-Baghdadi’s July 21 statement may be viewed as a rallying cry to Iraqi Sunnis in an attempt to unite them behind ISI’s Salafist vision. According to recent statements, ISI’s tangible objectives are to secure the release of Sunni prisoners and to recapture lost territory in Iraq. However, it is likely that the “Destroying the Walls” campaign is less of a direct operational plan to secure these objectives, and more of an opportunistic and pragmatic attempt by ISI and its new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to reassert influence in Iraq. In recent statements, ISI has attempted to appeal

to Sunni tribes, calling on them to “push your sons to the ranks of the Mujahidin to defend your religion, property and honor.”¹⁹ Whether or not ISI will find noticeable success in recruitment, the “Destroying the Walls” campaign is clearly demonstrating their ability to take advantage of Iraq’s evolving security environment and carry out widespread and lethal attacks.

SYRIA SPILLOVER

As the conflict in Syria continues and tension at the Iraqi border increases, ISI is likely benefiting. Anbar and Ninewa, the two provinces that encompass the 605 km border with Syria, were historic AQI and ISI strongholds between 2003 and 2007. Now, ISI may be reestablishing dominance in those areas; though attacks in these provinces have been minimal, the likely targets are also, which is consistent with the idea of a growing support zone. Furthermore, the general lack of security in the northern border region has given way to an expanded ability for ISI and its affiliates to move freely between Iraq and Syria. Additionally, the increase in weapons and ammunition as a result of the ongoing conflict in Syria have likely reenergized ISI efforts in Iraq and allowed them to reestablish and expand historic supply lines, especially those near Jabal Sinjar in Ninewa province.²⁰ According to members of the Shammar tribe, which has a large presence in Ninewa province, ISI “has a virtual monopoly on the flow of arms and fighters to Syria.”²¹

At the same time, however, the political deadlock and widespread corruption in Iraq has also facilitated the existence and expansion of ISI. According to Dr. Michael Knights of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “the Sunni insurgencies are being kept on life support by the political problems in Iraq, the lack of reconciliation, the collapse of population-centric counterinsurgency, over-centralization of security decision-making, noxious sectarian and ethnic identity politics, and the perception of Iranian influence on the government.”²² The mix of domestic issues and the neighboring armed conflict in Syria has created conditions of which ISI has gradually been able to take advantage. ISI strategy has adapted, and while it no longer holds the territory it did in 2006, it has nonetheless been able to operate effectively and strike anywhere in the country.

CONCLUSION

The implications of “Destroying the Walls” and ISI’s resurgence are significant. The sustained existence of ISI in Iraq will continue to test the capacity of the ISF and Maliki’s response to the growing threat. ISI seems unaffected by the ISF’s current “reactive, punitive, and heavy-handed” counterinsurgency strategy, which may ultimately force Maliki to reconsider how he must contend

with the ISI threat.²³ Additionally, Shi'a militant groups, which have largely remained quiet in recent months, retain the possibility of reactivation in the face of continued attacks in the southern provinces. How and when ISI will become emboldened to confront Iraqi security forces more directly remains to be seen; however, the state of the “Destroying the Walls” campaign is an ominous sign that ISI is presently unconstrained and growing.

NOTES

¹ Iraq Body Count [Database](#), 19 September 2012.

² Attack waves have occurred on February 23, March 20, April 19, June 13, July 23, August 16, and September 9. Attack wave is defined here as a series of simultaneous and coordinated attacks that target at least 10 cities within one day.

³ ‘Al-Qaeda claims 131 attacks in Iraq during Ramadan’ AFP, 9 September 2012.

⁴ In April 2010, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the former leader of AQI and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the former leader of ISI, were both killed in a joint Iraqi and U.S. Forces operation in the Thar Thar region of Anbar province, near the city of Tikrit. Following these deaths, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also known as Abu Du'a (unrelated to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi) took over control of both ISI and AQI, suggesting the two have become one in the same.

⁵ Al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr. [Fursan al-Balagh Media](#), July 2012. Translated by Aaron Zelin.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Zelin, Aaron. ‘New Statement from the Islamic State of Iraq’ [jihadology.net](#), 25 July 2012.

⁸ Sandiford, Gary. ‘Olive Group Weekly Security Update’ Iraq Business News, 13 September 2012.

⁹ Ghazi, Yasir. ‘Iraq insurgents kill at least 100 after declaring new offensive’ *New York Times*, 23 July 2012.

¹⁰ Iraq Body Count [Database](#), 23 July 2012.

¹¹ Sullivan, M. and Wicken, S. ‘Iraq Update #34’ Institute for the Study of War, 22 August 2012.

¹² Zelin, Aaron. ‘New Statement from the Islamic State of Iraq’ [jihadology.net](#), 25 July 2012.

¹³ Ghazi, Yasir. ‘Wave of attacks kills dozens in Iraq’ *New York Times*, 16 August 2012.

¹⁴ Roggio, B. and Ardolino B. ‘Al Qaeda in Iraq video details deadly raid in Haditha’ *Long War Journal*, 21 August 2012.

¹⁵ Wing, Joel. ‘What is Security like Today in Iraq? An Interview with Dr. Michael Knights’ *Musings on Iraq*, 31 July 2012.

¹⁶ Zelin, Aaron. ‘New statement from the Islamic State of Iraq’ [jihadology.net](#), 10 September 2012.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr. [Fursan al-Balagh Media](#), July 2012. Translated by Aaron Zelin.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ O’Bagy, Elizabeth. ‘Jihad in Syria’ Institute for the Study of War, September 2012.

²¹ Dagher, Sam. ‘Iraqi Tribes in Bind Over Syria Arms’ *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 February 2012.

²² Wing, Joel. ‘What is Security like Today in Iraq? An Interview with Dr. Michael Knights’ *Musings on Iraq*, 31 July 2012.

²³ Wing, Joel. ‘What is Security like Today in Iraq? An Interview with Dr. Michael Knights’ *Musings on Iraq*, 31 July 2012.