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Cyclical jihadist governance: the Islamic State governance cycle in Iraq and Syria

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ABSTRACT

The rise and decline of the Islamic State's (IS) caliphate between 2014 and 2018 have garnered significant policy and academic attention. Explanations for the group's territorial demise have focussed on its internal group dynamics and external conflict processes. Although both explanations are valid, I adopt a historical approach to show that IS's caliphate was just one cycle in a two-decade history of governance activity. IS has undertaken three governance cycles composed of phases of insurgency, gaining territory, establishing institutions, and losing territory. After each governance cycle, IS engaged in a process of critical self-reflection and adapted its governance strategy significantly. This resulted in a progressive history in which, with each cycle, IS governed greater amounts of territory, through more complex institutions, for a longer period of time. This article is based on fieldwork interviews conducted with both IS members and civilians who lived under IS control in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, as well as archival research on IS historical and contemporary governing documents.

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Introduction

On 4 July 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ascended the steps of the al-Nabi mosque in Mosul, Iraq, and announced the creation of a new Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria. This sparked an intensive phase of state-building that resulted in the Islamic State (IS) controlling a territory of over 100,000 square kilometres through a highly institutionalised governing apparatus. This unprecedented governing success sparked a high degree of policy and academic interest in the governance of IS, with much of the literature focussing on the caliphate period between 2014 and 2018.

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However, this predominantly ahistorical approach neglects IS's two-decade history of governance activity in Iraq and Syria, since its inception in 1999 to the present day. This paper presents a new approach to understanding IS's historical and contemporary governance: the governance cycle. Each governing cycle is made up of four phases: *insurgency*, *territorial control*, *establishing governing institutions*, and *territorial loss*. IS's history can be divided into three governing cycles and one currently ongoing and incomplete cycle. These cycles have occurred despite the numerous changes in name, leadership, location, stated goals, and resources that IS has undergone. They show that IS has consistently devoted resources to gaining control of territory and building governing institutions regardless of the specific context in which the group finds itself.

These governance cycles are not static; however, and with each cycle IS has been able to govern greater amounts of territory, for a longer period, with more complex institutional arrangements. From the first to the third cycle, IS had gone from controlling a few small villages in Iraq, with a limited number of 'paper' committees, to governing an area of over 100,000 square kilometres stretching across Iraq and Syria through a highly complex governing apparatus that mimics those of contemporary nation-states.

This paper argues that the progressive nature of these cycles can be at least partially attributed to IS's extensive and critical self-reflection of its territorial losses. Self-reflection refers to internal IS discussions about the failures of their governance approaches and the adoption of institutional and administrative changes to learn from and correct these failures. While it is already well documented that IS has begun to reflect on the internal administrative and theological divisions that contributed most recently to the fall of the caliphate,¹ this paper shows that this reflective approach goes back to the beginning of IS's governance activities. This paper begins with an overview of the existing literature on IS and longitudinal governance before discussing the concept of governance cycles. An in-depth case study of each of the four cycles, based on archival documents, interviews, and secondary literature is then discussed, before appraising the role of self-reflection in the progressive nature of IS's governance.

Literature on Islamic State and longitudinal governance

As Schwab and Pfeifer² discussed in the introduction to this special issue, there needs to be a greater scrutiny of the spatial and temporal dynamics involved in rebel governance. Although recent scholarly works have begun to investigate the effects of phases of conflict on rebel rule,³ the foundational texts on rebel governance tended to analysis the governance of rebel groups as a fixed, ahistorical entity with little variation across the duration of a group's rule or across a territory.⁴

The number of studies on the temporal dynamics of rebel governance have focussed on the long-term dynamics of rebel groups in civil wars, with few scholars focussing specifically on the temporal dynamics of jihadi rebel groups. Ahmad developed a theory of 'jihadi resilience' contending that economic logic dictates the boom-bust cyclical nature of jihadi groups.⁵ Using evidence from Somalia, Ahmad argues that jihadi groups have learnt to create diverse economic portfolios to withstand the varying degrees of external pressure they face. Jihadi groups tax and govern in proto-states when there is less pressure and move towards investment in clandestine businesses when forced to resort to insurgency. Weinstein similarly argues that economic flexibility is successful because of the resilience of rebel groups.⁶ Terpstra, by contrast, focuses on the role of networks when tracing the governance and legitimacy resilience of the Taliban through three phases from 1973 to 2019.⁷

This literature on the long-term development of jihadi rebel groups is important. However, less attention has been paid to the short-term temporalities of rebel rule and how these interact with longer-term trajectories. The aim of this paper is to address this by discussing the role of historical governance cycles. These are comparatively shorter cycles of governance that constitute the longer-term historical trajectory of a rebel group's governance. Understanding these shorter cycles is important for understanding both the historical evolution and future potential of a rebel group's governance course.

This paper uses an in-depth case study of IS to exemplify the role of governance cycles in a rebel group's historical governance evolution. Several studies have specifically analysed the historical evolution of IS's governance through various frameworks and approaches. Ingram analysed a series of 14 primary documents that form the 'insurgency canon'⁸ of IS. Ingram deduced a 10-point insurgency model from this canon that shows how IS tactically shifts between phases of guerrilla activity and governance to achieve its ultimate objective of establishing a caliphate.⁹ By contrast, Whiteside analyses IS's historical evolution through the lens of Mao's theory of revolutionary warfare that blends guerrilla activities and increasing conventional strength: the building/preservation phase, the expansion phase, and the decisive phase.¹⁰ The beginning and end of each phase are fluid and can vary from location to location. IS has gone through five phases of revolutionary warfare since 2002.¹¹ Both Ingram's and Whiteside's analyses are useful in highlighting the non-linear nature of IS's historical evolution.

Krause likewise notes the multifaceted nature of IS's governance, when he describes it as having three faces: '(it) is simultaneously an insurgent group, a state government, and a revolutionary movement'.¹² Krause acknowledges the efficiency of IS's governance, stating that, according to some who lived under its rule, ISIS was more effective and efficient than its Baghdad and

Damascus predecessors'.¹³ There is, however, a clear ahistoricism in this analysis, as it does not explain how these faces both developed and interacted prior to the establishment of the caliphate in June 2014.

Zelin focuses on the pattern of IS's territorial methodology and how it has 'attempted to expand, take over new territory, and then consolidate its control' in both Iraqi and Syrian headquarters and its worldwide provinces.¹⁴ Zelin's framework divides IS's existence into two stages: pre- or partial, and full territorial control. Within each category, Zelin identifies five linear phases of establishing control: intelligence, military, *da'wah* (missionary activities), *hisbah* (moral police), and governance. In the pre-/partial territorial phase, governance includes the introduction of taxes and the provision of basic social services. Under the full territorial control stage, governance is expanded to incorporate the creation of grand public work projects, the restarting of industries, the raising of its flag on buildings, and the creation of city and town borders and customs.¹⁵ Although these are useful analytical categories, which Zelin envisages being applied to IS's provinces worldwide, they are both rather ahistorical and broad. The pre-/partial territorial category does not include smaller historical governance actions by IS that are integral to its later cyclical governance success.

A brief discussion of the literature above shows that multiple authors have focussed on the governance evolution of jihadi groups and of IS in particular. However, these accounts have tended to overwhelmingly focus on the contemporary caliphate period of IS and ignored the role of IS's two-decade governance history. This paper therefore aims to build on these accounts by going beyond the caliphate period, and tracing the historical evolution of IS governance from its inception in 1999 to the present day. It shows that there is a clear cyclical and progressive pattern in IS governance history that continues to shape the trajectory of IS to the present day.

Islamic state's governance cycle: theoretical framework and methodology

IS has a long history of governance in Iraq and Syria from its inception in 1999 until the present day. Much of the academic and policy attention on IS governance has focussed on the latest caliphate era and its subsequent territorial decline. Narrowly concentrating on this period, however, ignores IS's two-decade history of governance and state-building. Through an examination of IS's historical governance activity, it becomes clear that its history is made up of a series of governing cycles.

As shown in [Figure 1](#), each cycle consists of four progressive phases: insurgency, territorial control, establishing governing institutions, and, finally, territorial loss. Within the *insurgency phase*, IS's primary focus was on mobility: the ability to conduct military and terrorist operations,

usually either simple or complex suicide, improvised explosive device (IED), or vehicle borne-IEDs in territory that is controlled by other armed groups or states. The phase of *territorial control* occurred when IS shifted its operational tactics from an insurgency to an attempt to both gain and hold territory. *Establishing governing institutions* started after IS gained control of some territory, with the number and reach of these governing institutions differing between the phases. The final phase is *territorial loss*: IS's loss of territory and the consequent abandonment of its previously established governing institutions.

The length of these phases varies among cycles, and the transition between phases is not necessarily clear-cut. The following analysis, however, aggregates the governance cycles to suggest the overall trend of the cycles throughout the duration of the IS's history. Crucially, however, it is important to recognise that in different areas of Iraq and Syria, IS was engaged in different phases of the governance cycle at the same time. In some areas, IS was in an insurgency phase, whilst in others it was establishing governing institutions at the same time (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)). This has implications for a greater understanding of the spatial dynamics of rebel governance and shows that there can be a large degree of spatial variation in governance phases across a rebel group's territory.

The cyclical nature of IS's governance history highlights that the gaining of territory and the attempt to establish governing institutions is fundamental and intrinsic to IS. Throughout its various name changes and its transition from a local Sunni Iraqi organisation to a transnational jihadist organisation, IS has maintained a singular drive to gain territory when circumstances are allowed with a consequent bureaucratisation of the territory through the establishment and consolidation of its

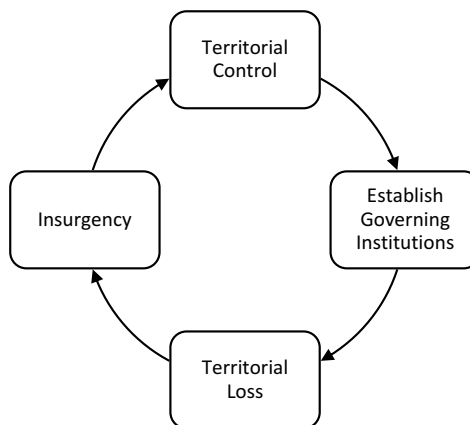


Figure 1. Ideal-typical IS Governance Cycle.

governing institutions. Even in circumstances when IS had very tenuous and limited controls over territory or when devoting resources to governing institutions jeopardised the territorial integrity of IS, it continued to follow this same cyclical governance path.

It remains unclear what – if any – is the ultimate governing objective of IS. Throughout its history, IS has varied in its governance ambitions and explicitly stated at different times that its aim is to be a ‘group’, an ‘insurgency’, a ‘state’, and a ‘caliphate’.¹⁶ Regardless of the label that IS has affixed to its shifting aims, IS has consistently followed the same four phases of the governing cycle. This suggests a path dependency in the governance methodology and approach of IS that has been in existence since its inception, regardless of the context in which it finds itself. These cycles, however, are not static. Rather, each cycle is progressively more advanced and sophisticated, indicating a degree of self-reflection and learning by IS. As shown in [figure 2](#), across IS’s governance cycles, it has managed to govern greater amounts of territory, for a longer period of time, with more complex governing institutional arrangements. The territorial control of IS grown steadily from just a few small villages and several cities in the first and second cycles, respectively, to 100,000 square-kilometres in the third phase.

The end of one cycle and the beginning of another cycle is not entirely clear-cut. As described above, there was spatial variation across IS’s territory that meant some areas had entered a new cycle, whilst others remained in a previous cycle. In the analysis below, however, I have divided the cycles according to the phases in which the majority of IS territory found itself. I have identified where significant areas of territory do not abide by the common cyclical trend.

The following sections present the four IS governance cycles. The historical period prior to 2013 was comparatively far more understudied than the more recent era of IS history. Analysis of the early IS cycles, therefore, relies mostly on primary documents related to the group that are stored in the ‘Combatting Terrorism Center Harmony Program’ archives,²² as well as the secondary literature covering this period. In contrast, for the period from 2013 onwards, this paper relies overwhelmingly on two sources of manually collected primary data. Firstly, the ‘Islamic State Provincial Governing Document Database’, a database of over 1000 documents that allows for a systematic comparison of IS’s governing institutions across its provinces and over time.²³ These documents are supported by interviews with 117 IS members, people who worked for IS and civilians who resided in IS territories. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the authors across various locations in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria over a period of 5 months.²⁴

Cycle	Dates	Governing Institutions Established	Territorial Peak
1	1999-2004	Military, Communications, Finance and Sharia Committees ¹⁷	Fallujah and Tharthar lake, parts of al-Anbar governorate ¹⁸
2	2004-2010	War, Public Relations, Security, Information, Martyr's Affairs, Petroleum, Agriculture, Health and Security Ministries ¹⁹	Parts of Fallujah, Anbar, Abu Ghraib, Karma and Dijlah provinces ²⁰
3	2010-2018	Federal level Sharia, Caliph and Shura offices, six federal offices and committees and 20 provincial ministries ²¹	100,000 square-kilometres in western/northern Iraq, eastern/central Syria
4	2018- Present	-	Active insurgency in western/northern Iraq, eastern/central Syria

Figure 2. Four IS governance cycles.

Governance cycle 1: 2001-2004

The conventional view is that IS's governance history began with its affiliated status with Al-Qaeda (AQ) in 2004 or the group's transformation into Islamic State in Iraq in 2006.²⁵ However, the first governance cycle of IS begun prior to any of these events, when Abu Mu'sab Zarqawi, a Jordanian Sunni *mujahid*, established Jama'at al-Tawhid wal Jihad (JTJ) in Iraq sometime between 1999 and 2001, and embarked on insurgency operations.²⁶ Although this first cycle was comparatively short and not characterised by sustained territorial control and establishment of governing institutions, it is worthy of analysis as JTJ underwent significant governance and organisational development that carried on throughout its latter governance cycles. As Jung describes 'the Islamic State has changed its name numerous times. (it) has retained most of its core organizational principles and structures throughout its incarnations'.²⁷

The establishment of JTJ in Iraq has its origins in the activities and network of Zarqawi. He first travelled to Afghanistan in 1989 and received training in the Sada camp, established by Abdullah Azzam, the co-founder of AQ. Zarqawi lamented the lack of organisation in both the training and amongst his comrades in Afghanistan, writing that 'there was no emphasis on organizational matters'.²⁸ Three years later, Zarqawi returned to Jordan, establishing a group called Jund al-Sham, with other Levantine veterans of Afghan jihad that aimed to take on the Jordanian state. However, the group was stopped by Jordanian intelligence, and Zarqawi was imprisoned until 1999.

After jail, Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan where he received \$200,000 seed money to establish a network and training camp in Herat.²⁹ The camp

consisted initially of 42 fighters, primarily from northern Jordan, but gradually increased in size. Although Zarqawi received money from AQ, he did not pledge allegiance to Osama bin Laden and was already marked at that time as an uncompromising ideological hardliner. Sayf al-Adl, an AQ leader who facilitated Zarqawi's return to Afghanistan reported that he 'had disagreements with hundreds of fraternal brothers' on doctrinal issues but that later he "became a different person (...). (H)e began planning for the future in a strategic manner'.³⁰

After the US invasion of Afghanistan, Zarqawi settled in northern Iraq and the insurgency phase of the governance cycle began. Zarqawi developed ties with Ansar al-Islam, a rival Sunni jihadist group, with a hierarchical structure that engaged in small-scale governance in areas under its control. Hisham believes that the structures of Ansar al-Islam 'look(ed) remarkably like what Zarqawi developed later in the rest of Iraq'.³¹ The coalition invasion of Iraq, however, provided a renewed stimulus and direction for JTJ, with Zarqawi viewing the country as 'a new arena for his jihad (...) where he could attack the Americans once Afghanistan was over'.³² Within half a year following the March 2003 invasion, Zarqawi had gained worldwide infamy for JTJ's various insurgency operations. These were predominantly directed against both the coalition's forces and Shia Muslims; JTJ's most publicised attacks include the bombing and killing of 17 at the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad, a double suicide bomb operation against the Shia Imam Ali Mosque that killed at least 75 pilgrims and the beheading of foreign hostages.³³

Although JTJ remained in the insurgency phase for the majority of this cycle, it did begin to gain and control a small amount of territory in Fallujah, al-Tharthar Lake and a number of smaller towns in al-Anbar province.³⁴ In Fallujah, the JTJ controlled territory in collaboration with other groups,³⁵ however it lacked the capacity to implement governing institutions within throughout its territory. Although the historical sources regarding the governance actions of JTJ in these small pockets of territorial control remain unclear, most analysts conclude that they were very limited, with Hashim summing up JTJ as 'lacking a solid base of operations and popular support'.³⁶ The most prominent institutions established by Zarqawi were reorganising the group into a series of devolved committees, including for military, communications, security, finance, and sharia, that came to form the backbone of IS's organisation throughout its future iterations.³⁷

The brief period of territorial control in its Fallujah heartland ended abruptly with the launch of Operation Vigilant Resolve in April 2004, in which US-led coalition forces attempted to rout out the group in a series of battles. These battles were intense and highly destructive; over a fifth of Fallujah's houses were destroyed, and around 2,200 JTJ fighters were killed in 1 week. This territorial loss marked the end of the first governance cycle and the reversion again of JTJ to insurgency tactics. Although each of these

phases is not as developed as the latter phases, there is already a clear sequential element and prioritisation by JTJ to pivot from an insurgency to gaining control and establishing governing institutions. The subsequent governing cycles show that IS learnt from this initial cycle and became more sophisticated.

Governance cycle 2: 2004-2010

The second IS governance cycle lasted for a period of 6 years between 2004 and 2010. The cycle initially began with a two-year insurgency that was marked by the group's transformation into Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Between 2006 and 2008, the group entered the cycle's next phases, gaining territory in several cities in western and northern Iraq, coupled with the implementation of limited governing structures. The amount of territory and the extent of the governing institutions were more sophisticated in this cycle compared to the previous cycle, demonstrating the self-reflection and institutional learning that IS undertaken.

Insurgency: 2004-2006

In October 2004, Zarqawi pledged *bay'ah* (an Islamic oath of allegiance) to Osama bin Laden, the leader of the global AQ movement. This formally integrated JTJ into the global AQ network, and they were subsequently renamed AQI. This *bay'ah* occurred despite Zarqawi's refusal to pledge allegiance to bin Laden during their time in Afghanistan, and analysts argue that it was primarily driven by the desire of Zarqawi to expand its operational capability through access to AQ's substantial logistical and financial resources.³⁸ The initial period after AQI's transformation was marked by an increase in AQI's prominence in the broader Iraqi Sunni insurgency movement. AQI cooperated with other Sunni groups including Ansar al-Sunna and Ansar al-Islam, and its operations reached into Anbar and Diyala provinces, Mosul, Baghdad, and Samarra cities.³⁹ AQI did not have territorial control but split its insurgency into nine districts under the control of an AQI regional commander.⁴⁰

AQI's insurgency in this period was focused on conducting attacks against the US-led coalition forces and the Iraqi Shia. Zarqawi believed that 'the danger from the Shia (...) (was) greater and their damage worse and more destructive to the (Islamic) nation than the Americans'.⁴¹ The explicit aim of this campaign was to push Iraq into a sectarian civil war, which Zarqawi believed would then draw a large number of Sunni fighters to join AQI against the Shia. Amongst the most prominent acts committed by AQI was the Ashura massacre in 2004 that killed 178 Shia pilgrims and the al-Askari mosque bombings that killed over 1,200 Shia petitioners in 2006.⁴²

However, AQI's focus on attacking Shia and its harsh imposition of Sharia led to the first dispute with the central AQ leadership. Ayman Zawahiri, the deputy leader of AQ, stated that the strictness of AQI's laws was alienating its Sunni allies in Iraq, and that its actions were hurting the 'global Jihadist movement'.⁴³ In spite of their evident ideological and strategic differences, AQ still encouraged AQI to expand its territorial and governing ambitions in a number of letters sent between 2005 and 2006. Zawahiri advocated for AQI to adopt a three-stage strategy: expel the American forces from Iraq, establish an Islamic state, and then expand this state to Iraq's neighbours.⁴⁴ Furthermore, two additional AQ leaders wrote to Zarqawi pressing on him the need for AQI to establish an Islamic state, 'which (would) proceed to solve all the problems of the Muslim community'.⁴⁵ All three leaders considered that in 2005 the 'facts and circumstances are propitious and favourable for announcing a state' with Zawahiri stating that it could perhaps one day 'reach the status of a caliphate'.⁴⁶

Gaining territory and establishing governing institutions – 2006-2008

This insurgency phase of the governance cycle ended when AQI shifted to a concerted focus on governance and state building. In early 2006, Zarqawi brought together a number of Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups under the umbrella organisation Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (Advisory Council of the Fighters). However, on 7 June 2006, Zarqawi was killed by an American F-16 air-strike, thereby ending the reign of IS's creator and founding ideologue who was responsible for instilling two guiding principles into IS as follows: the conquering and governing of territory.

Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen announced the creation of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.⁴⁷ ISIS later retroactively claimed in 2012–2013 that, due to ISI's creation after the death of Zarqawi, the *bay'ah* Zarqawi had made to Osama bin Laden was annulled and consequently removed ISI from its formal obligations to AQ. The members of Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen chose to pledge allegiance to Omar al-Baghdadi, stating 'I hereby enlist under your direct leadership twelve thousand fighters who constitute the army of al-Qa'ida'.⁴⁸ Omar al-Baghdadi was titled as '*Amir al-Mu'minin*' (Commander of the Faithful), the traditional title given to caliphs. The proclamation of a state by ISI was made without consultation of AQ's leadership, although AQ at this point did not publicly rebuke ISI, and as a result, 'ISI became a de-facto "state", acting without the consultation of AQ and even acting against its directions'.⁴⁹

From its initial announcement, the territory of ISI's new 'state' stretched across a vast swath of western and northern Iraq in both Sunni and Shia-majority areas: '(we) convey to you the glad tidings of the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq in Baghdad, Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salahdin, Ninewah (provinces), and part of the governorate of Babil and Wasit'.⁵⁰ ISI's actual

control differed greatly from these proclamations. However, the ISI did manage to gain territorial control of numerous zones, including Fallujah, Anbar, Abu Ghraib, Karma, and Dijlah provinces, which they ran as their own individual Emirates.⁵¹

Coupled with this shift towards territorial control, ISI now 'conceived of itself to be in the business of governance',⁵² with the announcement in April 2007 of a new complex governing apparatus. ISI appointed ten ministers who formed the leadership of the state: Ministers of War, Public Relations, Security, Information, Martyr's Affairs, Petroleum, Agriculture, and Health.⁵³ With this declaration, the ISI claimed, 'political responsibility for political leadership over much of Iraq (but ISI) had neither the will nor the capability to provide for the population's basic needs'.⁵⁴ Accordingly, ISI's governing institutions in this cycle were described as little more than a 'paper state'.⁵⁵ ISI did, however, manage an annual income of between \$70–200 million raised from hostage ransoms, oil smuggling, protection taxation, and selling off coalition equipment.⁵⁶ In the non-consecutive zones under its control, ISI did impose its interpretation of Sharia law on its residents through its security and legal institutions, as well as engaged in financial extractive activities. Including taxation and other financial demands.

Territorial degradation: 2007-2009

From 2007, ISI began to lose 'any semblance of statehood'.⁵⁷ It experienced a decline in both governance and territorial control 'when the group essentially retreated to Ninewa province and shifted into sporadic terrorist activity'.⁵⁸ Several factors led to these territorial losses and ISI's return to insurgency tactics. Most prominent is ISI's imposition of an unwanted political project on the Iraqi Sunni community.⁵⁹ This manifested itself in the formation of the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement in which Sunni tribes deserted ISI and fought against them. The *Sahwa* movement was partially due to widespread Sunni anger at ISI's harsh governance and strict interpretation of Sharia.⁶⁰ As Zawahiri had previously warned the group, this unflinching and uncompromising pursuit of imposing its version of Islamic law, had created strong enmity between ISI and its tribal 'citizens' and it had 'violated the cardinal rule of armed insurgencies: (it) alienated public support'.⁶¹ Initially starting as a bottom-up policy, the 'Awakening Councils' were eventually established in each region of Iraq and integrated into the US-led coalition's 'Surge Operation' which brought an extra 30,000 US troop to Iraq.

This military strategy was clear success.⁶² This intense lessening in the potency of ISI's insurgency capabilities was reflected in the coalition's bounty price for al-Masri which fell from \$10 million dollars in 2006 to just \$100,000 in February 2008. Although it continued to call itself ISI, al-Masri's wife was even

questioning him: ‘Where is the Islamic State of Iraq that you’re talking about? We’re living in the desert!’⁶³

Governance cycle 3: 2010-2018

The third governance cycle is the most sophisticated cycle in IS’s history to date. It began with a clearly defined three-year period of insurgency, followed by the gaining of territory in both Iraq and Syria. IS embarked subsequently on a three-year phase of establishing governance institutions before dramatically losing most of its territory from 2017 onwards.

Insurgency: 2010-2013

In 2010, ISI was reportedly reduced to a few dozen fighters in the Nineveh desert. The resurgence of ISI and the start of its third governance cycle began with the Shura council appointing Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as ISI’s new leader, replacing Abu Omar al-Baghdadi after he was killed in a joint US-Iraqi operation on 18 April 2010. However, it was not until 2011 that Baghdadi and the new IS spokesperson, Muhammad al-Adnani, released their first audio messages claiming ‘the (Islamic) State, will soon return, God willing, to all areas that have been taken from it’.⁶⁴

As shown in [Figure 3](#), IS hits its nadir in 2011 with less than 100 annual operations, before increasing to over 350 attacks in 2012. The peak of ISI’s insurgency phase was its highly successful “Breaking the Walls” campaign between 2012 and 2013 in which ISI launched 24 IED attacks against prisons

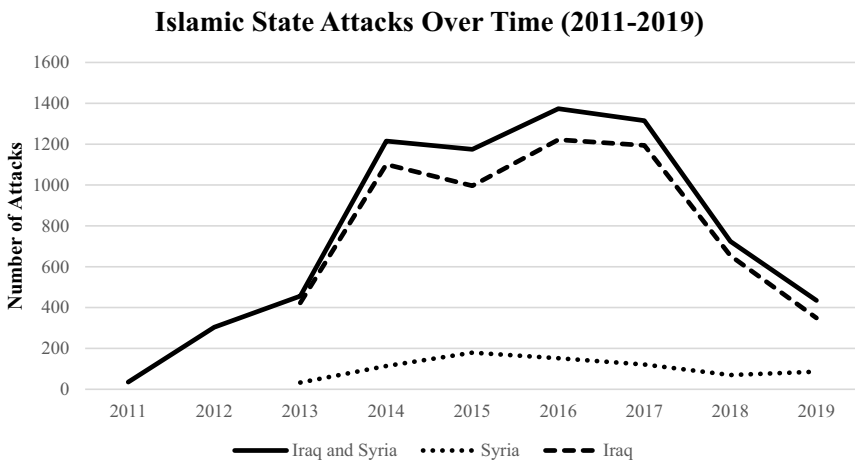


Figure 3. Trends in IS Attacks over Time (2011–2019). Number of attacks are annual and the data is taken from the Global Terrorism Database.⁶⁷

and organised eight jailbreaks of ISI members in Tikrit, Kirkuk, Taji, and Abu Ghraib.⁶⁵ The most prominent jailbreak occurred in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in July 2013, when ISI claimed that it orchestrated the release of 500 members.⁶⁶

The reasons behind the quick renewal of ISI in this insurgency phase – alternatively dubbed the ‘rebirth of the Islamist Phoenix’⁶⁸ or the ‘reinvention of the Islamic State’⁶⁹ – are multifaceted. However, scholars have identified four frequently inter-related structural and opportunistic reasons behind ISI’s success: the withdrawal of US-led coalition forces; the increased sectarianism of Iraqi politics; increased supply and greater re-organisation of IS fighters; and the Syrian conflict.⁷⁰

According to the US–Iraq Status of Forces Agreement, the US began withdrawing its 170,000 troops from Iraq in 2009 with the full evacuation of all forces completed by October 2011. The success of the military pressure employed by the US against ISIS, which included paying 100,000 Sunnis to participate in the Sahwa awakening and killing at least 2,000 ISI fighters and arresting 9,000 others, was responsible for suffocating ISI territorially and eliminating 32 of its top 42 leaders.⁷¹ However, the US troop withdrawal resulted in the removal of US influence and interest from Iraq, which led to a security vacuum in the country.

In addition, the increasingly sectarian nature of the Iraqi government increased the potency of ISI’s narrative of being the legitimate protector of the Sunni population. After the Shia Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki failed to achieve a majority in the 2010 elections, he instituted a series of increasingly sectarian policies that ‘led to a widespread repression of Sunnis (...) (with) a logic of accelerated purging of Sunnis’.⁷² This included the violent removal of Iraqi Sunni protest camps that resulted in the deaths of hundreds and arrests of thousands, enlisting Shia militias into the armed forces, arresting the Sunni Vice President, and disbanding the Sahwa.⁷³

As Gerges further argues, ‘Syria’s descent into all-out war is a significant variable in explaining ISIS’s expansion’.⁷⁴ It both gave space for ISI to set up training camps and networks away from the intrusive military operations of the Iraqi government and allowed the free movement of foreign fighters and resources into Iraq. In August 2011, Baghdadi sent an eight-men cell under the command of his fellow Camp Bucca prisoner Abu al-Jawlani to establish a network and begin conducting operations in the country. Al-Jawlani officially declared the creation of his group as Jabhat al-Nusra 4 months later in January 2012 after managing to establish an extensive clandestine jihadist network with its link to ISI initially firmly hidden.⁷⁵

Gaining territory: 2013-2014

ISI's transition from insurgency to the gaining territory phase of its cycle began in early 2013 with ISI's advancement into Raqqa, Aleppo, and other northern Syrian areas. It lasted for a year and a half until August 2014, during which ISI gained control of over 95,000 square-kilometres of territory in Iraq and Syria.

There are several key moments in this phase that contributed to ISI's territorial success. The first is ISI's shift towards Syria, which began with the unilateral audio announcement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in April 2013 that Jabhat al-Nusra was ISI's subordinate organisation and that the two groups had now merged into a new group, called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The ISIS declaration, however, took both al-Jawlani and AQ leader Zawahiri by surprise, and they both immediately rejected the merger. Al-Jawlani reiterated his *bay'ah* to AQ and Jabhat al-Nusra became the designated AQ province in Syria.

In May 2013, Zawahiri eventually released a letter and video ordering ISIS to return to Iraq and declaring the merger invalid. ISIS ignored this message from the AQ and stated that 'the Islamic State will endure (...) and not retreat from any spot of land to which it has expanded'.⁷⁶ After 10 months of battles between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra forces in northern Syria, AQ released a statement on 2 February 2014 definitively disavowing ISIS and stating that 'al-Qaeda is not responsible for ISIS's actions (...) it has spread sedition among the mujahideen factions in the Levant and shed protected blood'. It also degenerately referred to ISIS as a 'group', dismissing its claims to statehood.⁷⁷

The mini-war between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in this phase significantly aided ISIS's territorial conquest. ISIS initially focused on taking territory from Syrian Islamist and opposition groups rather than fighting the Assad regime. In the confusion immediately following Baghdadi's declaration, many Jabhat al-Nusra fighters reportedly joined ISIS due to their belief that Jabhat al-Nusra was part of ISIS and that it is *farḍ al-'ayn* (individual religious obligation) for all Muslims to pledge allegiance to an Islamic state. Further, ISIS managed to peel fighters off from both Islamist and secular opposition groups, as it offered comparatively better salaries and equipment. As Gerges states, 'new converts to ISIS say they were impressed by its military might, resilience, and financial solvency; in contrast, their own groups did not regularly pay their petty salaries'.⁷⁸ ISIS consequently consolidated territorial control in Raqqa and Deir az-Zur governorates that it captured in March 2013 and May 2014, respectively, from both Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front.⁷⁹ This territory included strategic areas on the Iraq-Syria border, over 80% of Syria's oilfields, and much of its agricultural land.

A final key aspect of this gaining territory phase was ISIS's successful return to Iraq and its campaign to *kasr al-huduud* (break the borders). ISIS's northern Iraqi campaign began on 4 June 2013 with an ultimately unsuccessful campaign to capture Samarra city. Two days later, on 6 June, ISIS launched a series of suicide bombings west of Mosul city, Nineveh province, and within 5 days, ISIS had seized control of the city. The collapse of the 60,000 combined Iraqi police and armed forces defending Mosul was almost immediate⁸⁰ and, from there, ISIS's forces expanded outwards conquering Tikrit city on 11 June and parts of Kirkuk on 23 June.⁸¹ The ISIS advance was halted as it neared Baghdad in late June, but not before ISIS took control of Diyala, Salahadin, and Anbar provinces and all the border posts between Iraq and Syria. This was followed up in early August with the conquest of the Kurdish and Yezidi majority areas in Ninewah consisting of Sinjar, Zumar, Mosul Dam, and Makhmour.⁸²

This gaining territory phase of the cycle ended with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivering the *Jum'ah Khutbah* (Friday Sermon) from al-Nabi mosque in Mosul, confirming the revival of an Islamic caliphate, and changing the name of ISIS to IS. Baghdadi declared themselves as Caliph and appealed directly to all 'Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory'.⁸³ By the end of this gaining territory phase, IS controlled territory of over 95,000 square-kilometres of territory across Iraq and Syria.

Establish governing institutions: august 2014-2017

Following the gain of territory in Iraq and Syria, IS embarked on an intensive phase of establishing governing institutions that mimicked the functions and administration of contemporary nation-states. The depth, coverage, and speed of IS's establishment of governing institutions in this cycle were sophisticated and highlights the evolution in IS's governance approach.

Within this phase, IS implemented a highly structured state that attempted to standardise and centrally regulate its governance. IS's state was composed of three hierarchical governance levels – the federal, provincial, and sectoral levels – with each level involving a myriad number of ministries, committees, and offices.⁸⁴ In brief, the federal level was composed of three centralised institutions: the 'Office of the Caliph', the 'Sharia Council', and the 'Delegated Committee' which oversaw both the central committees and IS's 19 Iraqi and Syrian provinces (*wilayat*). A Governor (*wali*) oversaw each province that included 14 decentralised provincial ministries including separate institutions for healthcare, agriculture, real estate, natural resources, and taxation (*zakat*).⁸⁵ Each province was composed of a number of smaller geographical sectors that varied in number from province to province.

Although the effectiveness and extent of IS's governing institutions varied extensively across time and space,⁸⁶ the sheer number of governing institutions that IS created was historically unparalleled. As figures from the Islamic State Provincial Governing Database shown in Figure 4, there is a clear pattern to the number of institutions IS has established. By 2013, IS had only established a limited number of governing institutions, which increased to at least 88 following the caliphate declaration in June 2014. The number of IS governing institutions subsequently peaked in 2015, with documented 211 governing institutions throughout Iraq and Syria, before diminishing to 100 across 2016 and only 18 documented institutions in 2017. The period 2014–2016 was therefore the most intense period of IS's institution building throughout its history.

The process of IS's institutional development was not fully linear and IS did previously implement a limited number of social and security-governing institutions in the territory it controlled. However, it is difficult to estimate the strength and number of these services due to IS's tenuous control over these areas and the shifting territorial boundaries between armed groups involved in the Syrian civil war. It is well documented that IS established proselytisation offices and education offices in Raqqa and Aleppo.⁸⁸ Establishing these institutions quickly was an important part of IS's strategy when taking over new territory in order to establish a hub for IS's control and to influence new followers to join it.⁸⁹ Whilst internal governing documents from Idlib, Aleppo and Raqqa governorates also show in 2013 that ISIS – at least on paper – had a number of other governing institutions, including an 'Office of Personal Affairs',⁹⁰ a 'Sharia

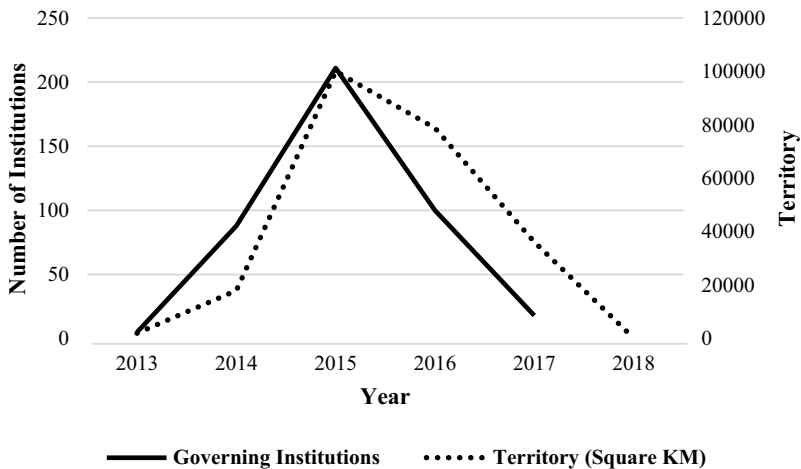


Figure 4. IS Documented Governing Institutions and Territory Over Time.⁸⁷

Court',⁹¹ and, a 'Ministry of Finance'.⁹² These, however, were limited endeavours and, as shown in the Islamic State Provincial Document Database, it was during this phase that there was a concerted establishment of governing institutions.

Territorial Loss: 2017-2018

Over the two-year period from January 2015 to January 2017, IS lost just over 20,000 square kilometres at a steady rate of decline. However, from January 2017 onwards, the rate of IS's territorial loss increased rapidly until it was reduced to a mere 200 square-kilometres of territory by September 2018.

During this period, the five-IS was in free fall, (it) was no longer engaging in any substantive state-formation or nation-building activities.⁹³ This is shown in the documents from the governing database, which confirm a simultaneous reduction in the number of IS-governing institutions operating during this period. Only five security- and social services-governing institutions were documented as functioning in Raqqa and al-Khayr provinces, including Soldiery,⁹⁴ the Judiciary and Ombudsman,⁹⁵ the Morality Police,⁹⁶ and the treasury.⁹⁷

IS also prioritised its military governing structures over its social and public services. As IS's extractive financial resources were strangled through a combination of its territorial losses and the financial targeting of its oil revenues by external actors; its remaining financial resources were devoted largely to funding its war rather than the provision of services for its population.⁹⁸ This was reflected in the perspectives of civilians living under IS control in 2017. One recalled, 'the one thing that IS was good at was security, they made us feel safe after they had taken over the area. I did not agree with them, but I respect them for that. But all of it went to hell and was destroyed. Al-Hisbah disappeared; the (IS) soldiers disappeared. Those few who stayed did not protect us or maintain order. They exploited us, allowed chaos to happen and for the regime to come back'.⁹⁹

IS's territorial losses were primarily a result of the combined military interventions against IS. Immediately from the inception of the caliphate in June 2014, a multitude of local, regional, and international actors combined to degrade IS's territory in Iraq and Syria. The main international force was the US-led 'Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, which started conducting operations in August 2014. Up until January 2021, the coalition had conducted 34,945 air strikes in Iraq and Syria and claimed to have retaken 110,000 square kilometres and removed 7,7 million people from IS control.¹⁰⁰ The other main international operation was the 'Operation Euphrates Shield', a Turkish operation led by both the Turkish armed forces and Turkish-aligned Syrian opposition groups that began in 2016 against

both IS and Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions in northern Syria. Over 7 months, Turkish forces took control of large parts of IS territory, including Jarabulus and the ideologically important town of Dabiq.¹⁰¹

The SDF, Iraqi armed forces, and the Shia-dominated Population Mobilisation Forces (PMF) were the primary local actors focussed on taking over IS's territory in Syria and Iraq, respectively. The SDF drove IS from important areas of North-East Syria including its capital of Raqqa, Tabqa, al-Hawl, and Baghouz. The Iraqi armed forces, along with their PMF allies, undertook multiple military operations to regain territory, with some battles lasting several years. The battle to retake Mosul in the 'Operation We Are Coming, Nineveh' ran from October 2016 to July 2017 and involved 60,000 Iraqi armed forces, whilst the Anbar Campaign and the "Operation Breaking Terrorism" in Fallujah involved at least 10,000 Iraqi armed force soldiers. By the end of 2017, IS's territory was reduced to a few hundred kilometres and signalled the termination of the third governance cycle.

As mentioned in the introduction, the phases were not the same throughout IS's territory. Throughout the duration of its previous governing cycle, IS had at times resorted to insurgency tactics in those areas in which it did not fully control territory. In 2015, in the contested Diyala province of Iraq, IS was reportedly engaged in a full-fledged insurgency and was 'already engaged in the kind of intimate violence that was seen across northern Iraq in 2013: granular, high-quality targeting of Sunni leaders and tribes working alongside the PMF'.¹⁰²

Governance Cycle Four: 2018 -

IS's fourth governance cycle and the 'pivot to all-out insurgency'¹⁰³ began in earnest in early 2018. IS tried to prepare its followers for this shift to insurgency even prior to the fall of Mosul. In a significant speech in May 2016, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the spokesperson of IS, stated, 'do you, O America, consider defeat to be the loss of a city or the loss of land? Were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land? And would we be defeated, and you be victorious if you were to take Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa or even take all the cities and we were to return to our initial condition? Certainly not!'.¹⁰⁴

This shift in language and narrative reflected IS's territorial reality on the ground. The eventual territorial last stand of IS occurred in the midst of IS's insurgency phase in the town of Baghuz Fawqani in al-Khayr province in March 2019. Over a month and a half long operation, the SDF, in conjunction with its international coalition partners, removed IS from its remaining four square-kilometres of territory. During the battle, tens of thousands of civilians fled IS and were subsequently transferred to northeastern Syrian refugee camps, where the SDF captured thousands of IS members. The Baghuz battle

was widely publicised as IS's last stand, and the images – particularly the thousands of refugees streaming from IS territory – were shown live on worldwide television.¹⁰⁵ Leaders of the SDF and coalition partners on 23 March 2019 took this opportunity to declare victory over IS.¹⁰⁶ IS's immediate reaction to the loss of its final territory was typical of the insurgency phase of its governance cycle. The IS spokesperson released a statement saying that 'the fact remains, if the Islamic State loses some towns and cities in some of its Wilayat, Allah grants its conquest in other Wilayat in imbalanced hit-and-run battles in which they drag the enemy with all that he owns, following a policy of eradication and scorched earth'.¹⁰⁷

The insurgency narrative of IS in this cycle is similar to IS's previous insurgency phases. It's formulated along the three Arabic s-words of where, who, and how: the desert border areas between Iraq and Syria (*sahraa*), taking place against any and all Sunni collaborators (*sahwat*), and through the medium of hit-and-run operations in rural and urban operations (*sawlat*).¹⁰⁸ IS itself has revealed that the operational phases of its insurgency compromised *nikaya* (guerrilla operations) and *istanzaf* (attrition) before it was able to consolidate and gain political empowerment (*tamkin*).¹⁰⁹ In both Iraq and Syria, the frequency and geographic distribution of IS attacks have ebbed and flowed over the duration of the current insurgency phase. In Syria in 2020 compared to 2019, IS 'doubled the number of attacks and of pro-regime fighters killed and tripled the number of high quality attacks'¹¹⁰ and expanded out from its headquarters in the Syrian desert (*badia*), north into Aleppo and west into Hama governorates. Similarly, in Iraq, IS has seen a significant uptick in its operations; it conducted 1,422 operations in 2020, an increase of 50% from 2019, and killed or injured 2,748 people. However, 2021 has seen a downwards trend, however, not to such a degree as to inspire confidence that the tide is turning'.¹¹¹

This increase can be partially attributed to IS's internal restructuring in 2019 after the death of Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. IS then created smaller mobile units of fighters to conduct operations in urban areas outside of its traditional spheres of interest in the rural Sunni areas of Iraq.¹¹² IS in Syria is still conducting operations mainly in rural areas with an absence of activity in urban areas although IS's free-reign in the desert gives it a potential springboard for future territorial gains.¹¹³ In Iraq, the counter-terrorism efforts of the PMF and coalition forces have so far been quite successful in restricting IS operations primarily to rural areas, but ISIS is moving closer to the cities, and its attacks are becoming better coordinated'.¹¹⁴

Learning and Self-Reflective Governance

The three complete governance cycles of IS are notable for their increasingly progressive and sophisticated nature. Across each governing cycle, IS has

been able to govern greater amounts of territory, with more complex institutional arrangements and for longer periods. This section proposes one reason for the progressive nature of these governing cycles: IS has consistently engaged in substantive critical self-reflection of its governance strategy successes and failures that resulted in the group learning and adopting tangible institutional and strategic changes

Many of the core ideological tenets of IS – notably its use of *takfir* and its punitive treatment of groups, such as the Shia and the Yazidis, considered as apostates or rejectionists – have not altered from its inception, in spite of frequent external and internal criticism. IS's governance, however, has changed as a result of this self-reflection showing the capacity and institutional willingness of IS to learn and adapt key elements of its governance strategy. There are three particular periods of self-reflection across IS's history that are worthy of discussion. It is likely that this is only a partial representation of the internal self-reflection of IS but it provides an interesting snapshot into the thoughts regarding IS's governance failures and the consequent methods it adopted.

Reflection and Learning in the ISI Period (2006-2013)

An area of reflection for ISI members was how its financial structures permitted high levels of financial graft and corruption. An anonymous 'lessons learned' document captured from ISI fighter details that one of the nine key failures of ISI was its poor use of financial resources.¹¹⁵ Other captured documents from ISI, however, probe further into exactly what those issues entail, focusing on the large mismanagement of money by ISI cell leaders. In Anbar province, in January 2007, ISI members were paid 60,000 Iraqi dinars a month (\$41 at exchange rates at the time) and an additional 30,000 Iraqi dinars for each child and wife, which continued to be paid to dependents, whether the ISI member was killed or captured.¹¹⁶ A 2009 report from an ISI member in Mosul investigated these payments and found that deceased members had far more dependents than their living colleagues, highlighting a form of corruption in which ISI leaders padded the number of dependents in their reports to ISI's financial administration and pocketed the payments for these fictional dependents.¹¹⁷ This form of corruption was described 'as the ISI equivalent of padding the payroll on a highway construction project'.¹¹⁸

In order to rectify the opportunities for salary corruption, a document from an ISI manager, called Asad, recommended changes to the financial structure of ISI in the wake of the death of two influential ISI administrative leaders. The main recommendation was to split the taxation and treasury offices into two separate and independent administrative entities: an 'Administration of Finance' that oversees the ISI's treasury and an office for the collection of

zakat and other taxes, in order 'to minimize the problem of embezzlement and fraud'.¹¹⁹ These internal criticisms were acted upon as IS's financial apparatus between 2014 and 2019 enacted these recommendations with a clear split in its treasury and tax collection functions. IS's tax collection revenue administration, *Diwan al-Zakat*,¹²⁰ levied, and collected a range of taxes in each province, which were then primarily sent to IS's separate central treasury, *Bayt al-Mal* (House of Wealth),¹²¹ with some revenues sent to provincial treasuries overseen by the Governor.¹²² These changes show that IS adapted its financial structures in order to improve its governance in response to its own internal critical reflections.

Following the failure of ISI in 2007, internal IS critiques claimed that the declaration of the state caused ISI to become complacent and that it allowed ISI 'to cover up their weaknesses (in the military and security [domains]), convincing themselves and others that they should (focus on) 'building a state and its institutions without paying due attention to military and security matters'.¹²³ There were also numerous critiques of ISI by external jihadi groups alleging that it had failed to meet the correct Islamic criteria required for establishing a state.¹²⁴ Within Iraq itself, the state declaration was seen by other jihadi groups as illegitimate, which led to a 'deleterious impact on the organization's ability to function on the ground'.¹²⁵

ISIS learnt these key lessons in the build up to its second declaration of an Islamic State and caliphate in June 2014. Notably, ISIS exerted considerable effort to build-up online support for a caliphate declaration so that it appeared as if ISIS was simply acceding to the popular demands of the global jihadist movement.¹²⁶ Many members of other jihadist groups joined ISIS following the caliphate declaration, in addition to the dozens of worldwide groups who pledged allegiance to IS in the months following its caliphate declaration.¹²⁷ This suggests that ISIS had learnt the mistakes made in previous state announcements and exerted efforts building up support and alliances both online and offline amongst jihadists.

A further key insight into ISI's self-reflection in this period is the Fallujah Memorandum, which was published by an unknown ISI member at some point between December 2009-January 2010.¹²⁸ The primary aim of the Fallujah Memorandum is to map out the long-term military strategy of ISI after its territorial defeat; with the strategy presciently summed up by the author as 'even if we say that the project of a state is currently unrealistic, it will be realistic in the future'.¹²⁹ There are several reflections on the previous mistakes of ISI's governance including its approach to the Sunni tribal Sahwa councils and lack of security maintenance in ISI-controlled areas. Recommendations such as the integration of Sunni tribal council members into ISI's governing apparatus were adopted in the IS era, especially through the creation of the 'Office of Public and Tribal Relations' institution.¹³⁰

Reflection and Learning in the ISIS and IS Period (2013-)

Although the territorial failure and governance decline of IS's caliphate is relatively recent, there are clear signs that IS had already begun to reflect on the causes and consequences of its most recent territorial defeat, with a particular focus critiquing the actions of Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. From July 2014 onwards, intense theological discussions had been going on among IS scholar-members, debating the exact role and extent of *takfir* (excommunication) in IS's judgements. Two camps formed between the relatively moderate Bin Ali followers and the extreme Hazimi faction. Turki al-Bin Ali and his followers adhered to the principle of *al-'udhr bi'l-jahl* (excusing on the basis of ignorance) so that 'ignorance may serve as a legitimate excuse for holding errant beliefs, and so shield one from the charge of excommunication'.¹³¹ By contrast, the Hazimi faction, named after an imprisoned Saudi cleric Ahmad al-Hazimi who is not a member of IS, rejects the excuse of ignorance, leading ultimately to a situation of *takfir al-'udhr* (excommunication of the excuser) in which a potentially infinite chain of Muslims can be excommunicated for failing to initially excommunicate someone.¹³²

This was, however, not merely an academic debate on a highly specific aspect of Islamic theology. Rather, this conflict led to both internal personnel and structural changes within IS's governance apparatus. The upper echelons of IS's state – such as its 'Delegated Committee' and 'Office of Research and Studies' – shifted between the control of the two groups, with factional supporters being either detained, killed, promoted or published, depending on the prevailing configuration of these institutions.¹³³ This led to several treatises and books published by current and former IS members – such as 'The False Caliph' by Abu Isa Al-Masri and 'Go Back on Your Pledge of Allegiance to Al-Baghdadi' by Abu Muhammad Al Hashemi.¹³⁴ The latter directly critiqued al-Baghdadi for a litany of failures, including his ideological innovations, failure to implement Sharia law, and reliance on cronyism.¹³⁵ A key tenet of these complaints is that IS's policies of *takfir* resulted in the failure of the caliphate. For they led to the systematic grafting and abuse of its residents, dishonouring and neglect of Muslim women in its territory, and the failure to properly defend its conquered territory. Suggestions made by the authors include the usurping of al-Baghdadi as a Caliph and the establishment of a fully realised Shura council to overcome the negative results of the al-Baghdadi's cronyism.

Detailed internal critiques of the relative minutiae of IS governance has already emerged. In one widely spread critique, Abu al-Faruq al-Masri, a presumably Egyptian member of IS based in Raqqa, published a series of lectures entitled 'Message on the *Manhaj* (Prophetic Methodology)'. They criticised IS for establishing its Syrian headquarters in Raqqa rather than Aleppo, accepting pledges of allegiance from worldwide groups who were

not ready to govern, failing to defeat Jabhat al-Nusra, and its increasing international focus.¹³⁶ According to al-Tamimi, al-Masri disappeared 6 months after the publication, presumably killed by IS itself in retaliation for this critique.

Since the publication of these critiques, al-Baghdadi and his successor Caliph, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, have been killed and it remains unclear to what extent these critiques will continue under the new IS leadership. There are, however, tentative signs that IS's new leadership under Caliph al-Quraishi has taken some notice of these critiques as evidenced in IS's al-Naba newsletter and audio messages by IS spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Muhajir in October 2019. IS announced the creation of 'next steps in respect to methodology, organization, and strategy'.¹³⁷ These include reconciliation with Sunni communities and adopting a more open outreach strategy. It remains to be seen whether IS's future iterations will see both continued reflective critique and subsequent changes to its governance strategy, as seen in previous cycles of the group's history.

Conclusion

This paper presents a new way of understanding the longitudinal evolution of IS. Its history is defined by four governance cycles, with each cycle being composed of four phases: insurgency, gaining territory, building governing institutions, and territorial loss. With each progressive cycle IS learnt from its previous failures, establishing more sophisticated governing structures, across greater amounts of territory.

This paper further shows the need to further scrutinise the spatial and, in particular, the temporal dynamics of rebel groups. By going back to the origin of IS governance history, it has been shown that shorter cycles of governance can constitute the longer-term historical trajectory of a rebel group's governance. Understanding these shorter cycles is important for understanding both the historical evolution and potential of a rebel group's governance future.

An interesting avenue for further reflection is the impact that this cyclical governance has on the concept of defeating IS. In the aftermath of the June 2014 Islamic caliphate declaration, the stated goal of the US and its Operation Inherent Resolve coalition partners were 'to achieve a full and enduring defeat' of IS. This conceptualisation of defeat was, initially, a traditional counter-terrorism approach that the US employed in the surge period of the ISI insurgency: eradicating IS's territory and striking the group's operational capability to conduct terrorist or insurgency operations. However, the cyclical nature reveals the potential fallacy of achieving a 'lasting defeat' against IS. In each of its three completed cycles, IS ended up ultimately being territorially bereft or limited to a rather small area of territory. Yet, each time IS has successfully been able to exploit opportunities

to restart a new governing cycle, it has crucially been better and more sophisticated at regaining territory. For IS, defeat is therefore not necessarily measured in terms of the amount of territory that is lost or the number of governing institutions that failed. Rather, IS is engaged in a long-term governance project in which a specific territorial defeat or victory is a mere contour in the map of its state-building project. This has implications for the utility and effectiveness of the current military-dominated counter terrorism and counter-insurgency approach against IS.

Notes

1. Al-Tamimi, "Dissent in the Islamic State"; and Al-Hashimi, "ISIS's New Leadership: Past Lessons in a New Strategic Environment."
2. Pfeifer and Schwab, "Politicising Rebel Governance."
3. Terpstra, "Rebel Governance, Rebel Legitimacy, and External Intervention"; and Arjona, *Rebelocracy*.
4. Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers*.
5. Ahmad, "The Long Jihad."
6. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*.
7. Terpstra, "Rebel Governance, Rebel Legitimacy, and External Intervention."
8. Ingram, "The Long Jihad: The Islamic State's Method of Insurgency" 19.
9. See: Ingram, 19–27.
10. Whiteside, "New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare."
11. Whiteside, 7.
12. Krause, "A State, an Insurgency, and a Revolution," 235.
13. Krause, 232.
14. Zelin, "The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology."
15. Zelin, "Interpreting the Fall of Islamic State Governance."
16. Ingram, "The Long Jihad: The Islamic State's Method of Insurgency: Control, Meaning, & the Occupation of Mosul in Context."
17. Hashim, *The Caliphate at War*.
18. Tonnessen, "Destroying the Islamic State Hydra: Lessons Learned from the Fall of Its Predecessor"; and Napoleoni, *The Islamist Phoenix*.
19. Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate."
20. Napoleoni, *The Islamist Phoenix*, 13.
21. al-Tamimi, "A Caliphate Under Strain: The Documentary Evidence."
22. The Harmony Program: <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program>.
23. For further details of the database, see Bamber, "Without Us, There Would Be No Islamic State".
24. For further details of the interview process and ethical considerations, see Bamber.
25. See note 15 above.
26. Details about Zarqawi's actions prior to 2004 are in dispute. For the most in-depth account of Zarqawi's life, see: Napoleoni, *Insurgent Iraq*.
27. Jung et al., "Managing a Transnational Insurgency: The Islamic State of Iraq's 'Paper Trail', 2005-2010," 6.
28. Quoted in Hashim, *The Caliphate at War*, 140.
29. Weiss and Hassan, *Isis*, 13.

30. See note 28 above, 146.
31. *Ibid.*, 148.
32. See note 29 above, 16.
33. "75 Killed in Mosque Blast"; Wilson, "Jordanian Embassy Blast Kills 11 in Baghdad"; and Oliver, "The Life and Death of Nick Berg."
34. Napoleoni, *Insurgent Iraq*; Khan and Whiteside, "State Accompli."
35. Tonnessen, "Destroying the Islamic State Hydra: Lessons Learned from the Fall of Its Predecessor."
36. Hashim, *The Caliphate at War*, 154.
37. See note 17 above.
38. Napoleoni, *Insurgent Iraq*, 96–98.
39. See note 36 above, 154.
40. See note 31 above, 156.
41. Quoted in Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," 52.
42. Fishman, "Dysfunction and Decline," 48.
43. Zelin, "The War between Isis and Al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," 3.
44. See note 29 above, 58.
45. Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," 18.
46. Ayman al-Zawahiri, [Letter to Zarqawi,] 16 July 2005, 10, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Original.pdf>.
47. For a discussion on the leadership and strategic deception by the group in this period, see Whiteside, "Lying to Win."
48. al-'Ubaydi et al., "The Group That Calls Itself a State" 15–16.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Muhārib al-Jubūrī, "al-'lān 'an qiyām Dawlat al-'Irāq al-Islāmiyya," 15 October 2006. Transcript in *Majmū'*, 221–223. Original quoted in English by Bunzel, 17.
51. See note 20 above, 13.
52. al-'Ubaydi et al., "The Group That Calls Itself a State."
53. See note 36 above, 159.
54. Fishman, "Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq."
55. See note 19 above.
56. See note 29 above, 64.
57. *Ibid.*
58. See note 27 above, 6.
59. Fishman, "Dysfunction and Decline."
60. The *Sahwa* also fractured the anti-IS resistance, see Khan and Whiteside, "State Accompli."
61. Gerges, *ISIS*, 87.
62. Nizza, "An Al Qaeda Chief's Bounty Is Slashed."
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*
65. Clifford and Weiss, "'Breaking the Walls' Goes Global: The Evolving Threat of Jihadi Prison Assaults and Riots."
66. Peritz, "The Coming ISIS Jailbreak: The Strategy That Enabled the Caliphate's Rise Just Became Viable Again."
67. This data is taken from the Global Terrorism Database and also broadly corresponds with IS's own self-reported operations in Iraq and Syria. Data goes up to

- 2019 – the last year that data was available. <https://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/global-terrorism-database-gtd>.
68. Napoleoni, *The Islamist Phoenix*.
 69. See note 36 above, 160.
 70. Bamber, "Views"; and Peritz, "The Coming ISIS Jailbreak: The Strategy That Enabled the Caliphate's Rise Just Became Viable Again."
 71. Whiteside, "The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare."
 72. Mohamedou, *A Theory of ISIS*.
 73. Bamber, "Views."
 74. See note 61 above, 170.
 75. Drevon and Haenni, "Non-Ideological 'Jihadi' Rebel Governance? HTS in Idlib."
 76. Two statements from IS were released in June 2013: one by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and a further statement by ISIS spokesperson al-Adnani. Quoted in Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," 26.
 77. Bunzel, 29.
 78. See note 61 above, 193.
 79. The Islamic Front were a short-lived alliance of Syrian Islamist groups from 2013–2014 that were primarily formed to counter ISIS. Its largest groups were Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam.
 80. However, due to corruption within the Iraqi army and police force, the actual number of forces defending Mosul was probably around a third of this.
 81. Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad*, 16.
 82. This capturing of territory was accompanied with the mass genocide and enslavement of Yezidis living in these areas. For more details, see Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, *The ISIS Reader*.
 83. Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter.
 84. See note 21 above.
 85. Bamber, "'Without Us, There Would Be No Islamic State': The Role of Civilian Employees in the Caliphate."
 86. Bamber, "Honeymoon, Peak and Degradation: Three Phases of Islamic State's Governance Effectiveness."
 87. This data is taken from the Islamic State Provincial Governing Database and includes all documents which contained either a Gregorian or Hijri calendar date.
 88. C. Caris and Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria."
 89. Reuter, *Die Schwarze Macht*.
 90. Document RQ022.
 91. Document ID001
 92. Document HL010
 93. See note 36 above, 287.
 94. Document NP067
 95. See note 90 above, 011
 96. Ibid. 023
 97. See note 94 above, 051
 98. See note 36 above, 287.
 99. Zaynab, 42, housewife, al-Khayr province. Interview: June 2019, Turkey.
 100. Data taken from the Operation Inherent Resolve, Civilian Casualty April Monthly Report: <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/CJTF-OIR%20PR-20210416-01-CIVCAS%20%28January%202021%20Data%29.pdf>.

101. IS attach great importance to the town of Dabiq since the time of Zaraqawi as the Prophet Muhammad reportedly said that it is at Dabiq that the armies of Rome will set up their camps and where the army of Islam will meet them in an epic battle. IS named its premier propaganda magazine after this town and make frequent reference to the apocalyptic battle that will take place there. For more information, see: Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants."
102. Knights, "Predicting the Shape of Iraq's next Sunni Insurgents."
103. Hassan, "Insurgents Again."
104. Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, *The ISIS Reader*, 251.
105. Hecimovic, "Islamic State's Last Stand the Battle for Baghouz."
106. "Islamic State Group Defeated as Final Territory Lost, US-Backed Forces Say."
107. Sheikh Abdul-Hasan al-Muhajir quoted in Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, *The ISIS Reader*, 284.
108. Hassan, "Out of the Desert: ISIS's Strategy for a Long War."
109. Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, *The ISIS Reader*, 124–34.
110. Waters, "ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review."
111. Bunzel, "Explainer: The Islamic State in 2021."
112. Al-Hamid, "ISIS in Iraq: Weakened but Agile."
113. See note 110 above.
114. Al-Hashimi, "ISIS in Iraq: From Abandoned Villages to the Cities."
115. See note 42 above, 20.
116. Jung et al., "Managing a Transnational Insurgency."
117. Document in the Harmony Database: NMEC-2009-633789.
118. Jung et al., "Managing a Transnational Insurgency"
119. Document number in Harmony Database: NMEC-2009-636065.
120. This Diwan was called several different names including 'Diwan al-Zakat wal-Sadaqat' (Diwan of Zakat and Charity) and 'Maktabah al-Zakat' (Office of Zakat) as shown in documents SH001 and HL056 respectively.
121. See note 90 above, 071
122. It is unclear if there was one central Bayt al-Mal or multiple Bayt al-Mal located in each province. It is likely that this changed across the duration of IS's territorial control.
123. al-'Ubaydi et al., "The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State," 19.
124. al-'Ubaydi et al., "The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State."
125. See note 36 above, 160.
126. Zelin, "ISIS Is Dead, Long Live the Islamic State."
127. Zelin, "The War between Isis and Al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement."
128. Full title of the memorandum is 'A Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq'. Translation of the memorandum is available in Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, *The ISIS Reader*.
129. Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, 118.
130. Whiteside and Elallame, "Accidental Ethnographers."
131. Bunzel, "Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State."
132. Hamming, "The Extremist Wing of the Islamic State."
133. Ibid.
134. Al Hashemi was a former member of the IS Office of Research and reportedly was the orchestrator of the January 2019 coup against Caliph Baghdadi.

135. Barak, "The False Caliphate: ISIS Leadership Crisis'.
136. Al-Tamimi, "Dissent in the Islamic State."
137. Al-Hashimi, "ISIS's New Leadership: Past Lessons in a New Strategic Environment."

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