

The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham's Messages and Self-Presentation in Syria and Iraq

By Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi

As the civil war in Syria continues to rage on, it is apparent that the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) in Syria has enjoyed a degree of success that the group's counterparts in Iraq have never been able to achieve. For example, ISIS controls a number of towns and villages in Syria, most notably on the border areas with Turkey, such as Jarabulus in Aleppo province and ad-Dana in Idlib. Further, even where ISIS is not the main faction in charge, the group has engaged in outreach to locals through providing social services that resemble what my colleague Phillip Smyth terms the mechanisms of a "[proto-state](#)."

This phenomenon most notably encompasses the provision of food aid, with ISIS even having introduced a formal rationing system of basic necessities in some Aleppo suburbs. In the rural Aleppo town of Manbij, ISIS is currently attempting to [gain a monopoly on the means of bread-production](#) in the town, sparking a dispute with the local council.

Elsewhere, particularly in towns where ISIS is the dominant faction (dubbed "emirates" - such as the "[Emirate of Jarabulus](#)"), the group goes beyond provision of food to running schools for children. From Raqqa, ISIS recently released a video of [Qur'an recitation classes](#) for children in the mosques.

The consequence of this level of control is that in images and videos put out by ISIS, its supporters and sympathizers within Syria, the wider ideological agenda of the group is made much more apparent than within Iraq. Thus, below one can see a number of images from Syria circulated among pro-ISIS circles that openly affirm the goal of establishing a Caliphate, which should eventually encompass the entire world.



Figure 1: A photo of a pro-ISIS rally in the Aleppo area released by an unofficial pro-ISIS media network called “State of the Caliphate.” The placard reads: “Islam: Political Justice. Islam: Economic Justice. Islam: Societal Justice. State of the Caliphate: God’s Shari’a on Earth.”



Figure 2: An image that can be found circulating on pro-ISIS social media pages from Syria, depicting the entire Earth under the banner of ISIS.



Figure 3: An image circulated among some pro-ISIS activists (e.g. in Idlib). The provinces of the more immediate “State of the Caliphate” are as follows: the Iberian Peninsula is Andalusia, northwest and west Africa the Maghreb, central and east Africa the Land of Abyssinia, Egypt the “Arḍ al-Kanana,” the Levant ash-Sham, and the Arabian Peninsula excluding Yemen (which retains its name) is the Hejaz. Iraq likewise retains its name, but the existence of a Kurdistan province to the north alongside Anatolia is included. Iran (with the exception of Ahwaz in the southwest) and Central Asia become Khorasan, while southeastern Europe as far as Vienna is the province of Europe. Southern Russia forms the Caucasus.



Figure 4: A mural from the ISIS-controlled town of Jarabulus (Emirate of Jarabulus) on the northern border with Turkey in Aleppo Governorate. The logo on the left, with the ISIS banner in the middle of it, reads: “The Caliphate: Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham.”



Figure 5: A photo from an ISIS video in May of a youth training camp the group was running in the Abu Kamal area along the border with Iraq. The children are wearing T-shirts with the logo: “The Cadets of the Caliphate.”

Video evidence paints a similar picture. Indeed, even when there was only Jabhat al-Nusra, in localities where the group has had a long-established presence, one could find rallies for a Caliphate, such as this video from the [Idlib town of Binnish](#). In a similar vein, from the Aleppo area of Tariq al-Bab, which has a strong ISIS presence, one can find regular rallies for an Islamic state and/or Caliphate. For example, here is a rally from mid-July set to the nasheed [‘Labbayka Islam’](#)- a well-known nasheed for the Caliphate also used in Hizb-ut-Tahrir circles.

Likewise, in one of ISIS’ da’wah meetings that have now become a familiar sight in the Aleppo suburbs, [one of the ISIS muhajireen](#) explains that they have come in order to establish an Islamic state in Arḍ ash-Sham as an extension to an Islamic state in Iraq that is currently fighting the Safavid government and army. In the Aleppo town of Manbij, which ISIS shares with some other battalions, a preacher for ISIS gave a [lengthy sermon in the town’s grand mosque](#) on the need for the establishment of a Caliphate, explaining it as an all-embracing system of economics, governance and justice, while denouncing rival concepts like democracy, a secular state and nationalism.

Arguably most significant are the official ISIS videos released by al-Furqān media, as part of two series entitled “Those who believe, emigrate and wage jihad” and “Messages from Arḍ al-Melāḥam [Syria].” From the first, we have the video of ISIS’ martyred French convert Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Faransi, who speaks in an interview of the [need to fight jihad in Syria and restore the Caliphate](#). The second series is widely advertised on jihadi forums, as shown by the photo distributed below:



Figure 6: “Messages from Arḍ al-Melāḥam.”

The [fighter shown in Figure 6 is an interviewee](#) in one of these videos. His accent most likely indicates origin in the Iraq-Syria border areas. Going by the nom de guerre of Abu Omar al-Anṣārī, he is said to have taken part in the ISIS-led assault on Mannagh airbase in rural Aleppo. He is also described in the video caption as the eldest fighter for ISIS, noting in the video that he is 75 years old.

Among his children, four ended up becoming mujahideen, and one of them was imprisoned in Iraq by the Americans. He says: “I came to jihad because jihad is farḍ al-ayn [a duty incumbent on all Muslims]...I hope for martyrdom with my children.” Expanding on ISIS’ wider vision, he explains:

“God, give victory to Islam, give victory to the mujahideen...over all the enemies of the mujahideen...God give the mujahideen victory in every place....in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Somalia, Mali, Iraq, Pakistan and in every place...My age and elderliness are not a problem...Fighting [jihad] will always be until the Day of Judgment...God willing, when we are victorious in this land [Bilad ash-Sham], **we will complete the errand to establish an Islamic state over the whole world. It is necessary for the Islamic state to be established by the permission of God- Almighty and Exalted is He- over the whole world, and it [jihad etc.] is not only in Bilad ash-Sham. For if we are victorious here, it will be guaranteed in the rest of the land, God willing**” (emphasis in bold).

The vision outlined is entirely consistent with what the [al-Qa’ida leadership](#),

fighters and supporters have stated on past occasions:

Richard Dawkins: Do you want Islam to take over the rest of the world?

Yousef al-Khattab: Of course I want it to, and it will.

(From an interview conducted by Richard Dawkins for the documentary “The Root of All Evil?” with [Yousef al-Khattab](#), who would go on to found the pro-al-Qa’ida site [RevolutionMuslim.com](#)).

You’ll see that the Muslim war has just started...until Islam is spread throughout the whole world.

(Videotape of failed Times Square bomber [Faisal Shahzad](#), released by Umar Media and obtained by al-Arabiya).

Alright, i [sic] wont [sic] go into too much details about me [sic] fantasy, but basically they are jihad fantasies [sic]. I imagine how the great jihad will take place, how the muslims will win insha Allah and rule the whole world, and establish the greatest empire once again!!!

(From a 2005 forum posting by [Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab](#), who tried to bomb a flight en route to Detroit on Christmas Day 2009)

Or, as one Egyptian supporter of ISIS put it to me in response to the [UK’s designation of the mujahideen](#) as the greatest security threat from Syria: “I love it when the Fish & Chips Folks exaggerate. Their [the mujahideen’s] focus is on Bashar for now. Their [the British people’s] time will eventually come Far Future.”

In contrast, ISIS and its supporters within Iraq are not putting so much emphasis on transnational ambitions for a Caliphate. Instead, it is accurate to characterize ISIS’ current approach in Iraq as conveying an image of “protector of Sunnis” (as suggested by analyst Joel Wing of *Musings on Iraq*), playing on the fact that many Sunni Arabs undoubtedly perceive themselves to be a marginalized minority, or even a plurality/majority unjustly usurped of power. Despite the sharp rise in ISIS attacks and attendant violent deaths, the group still lacks the sort of power it enjoys in parts of Syria.

For example, here is a relevant excerpt from an ISIS statement on a series of bomb attacks carried out in [Baghdad and other areas of Iraq at the end of last month](#): “The lions of the people of the Sunnah in Baghdad al-Aziz and the other provinces of the Islamic State unleashed a response to the recent crime which the Safavid government committed with the execution of a new cohort of prisoners of the Muslims of the people of the Sunnah in Iraq.” Similarly, in a [statement released on 7 September](#), ISIS characterized its latest operations as a “response to the ongoing security campaigns of the Safavid army and police that have reached the Sunni belt areas of Baghdad.”

More locally, the [Mosul branch of ISIS released a statement](#) in response to the

Maliki government's launching of a [new security offensive last month](#) in the Jazira region of northwest Iraq, giving the "Rafidites" of Ninawa province three days to leave or face death, for "we are taking revenge for our brothers and our *dignitas* in the province of Diyala and the regions of Baghdad, on account of what the soldiers of Satan from the Majoos Persians and the Rafidites who hate the people of the Sunnah there." Earlier that month [Figure 7], Mosul's ISIS branch had released a statement justifying a suicide car-bomb operation against the Iraqi army in the Mosul area as a 'defensive jihad,' citing the familiar Qur'anic verse 22:39 in justification: "Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought because they have been wronged."

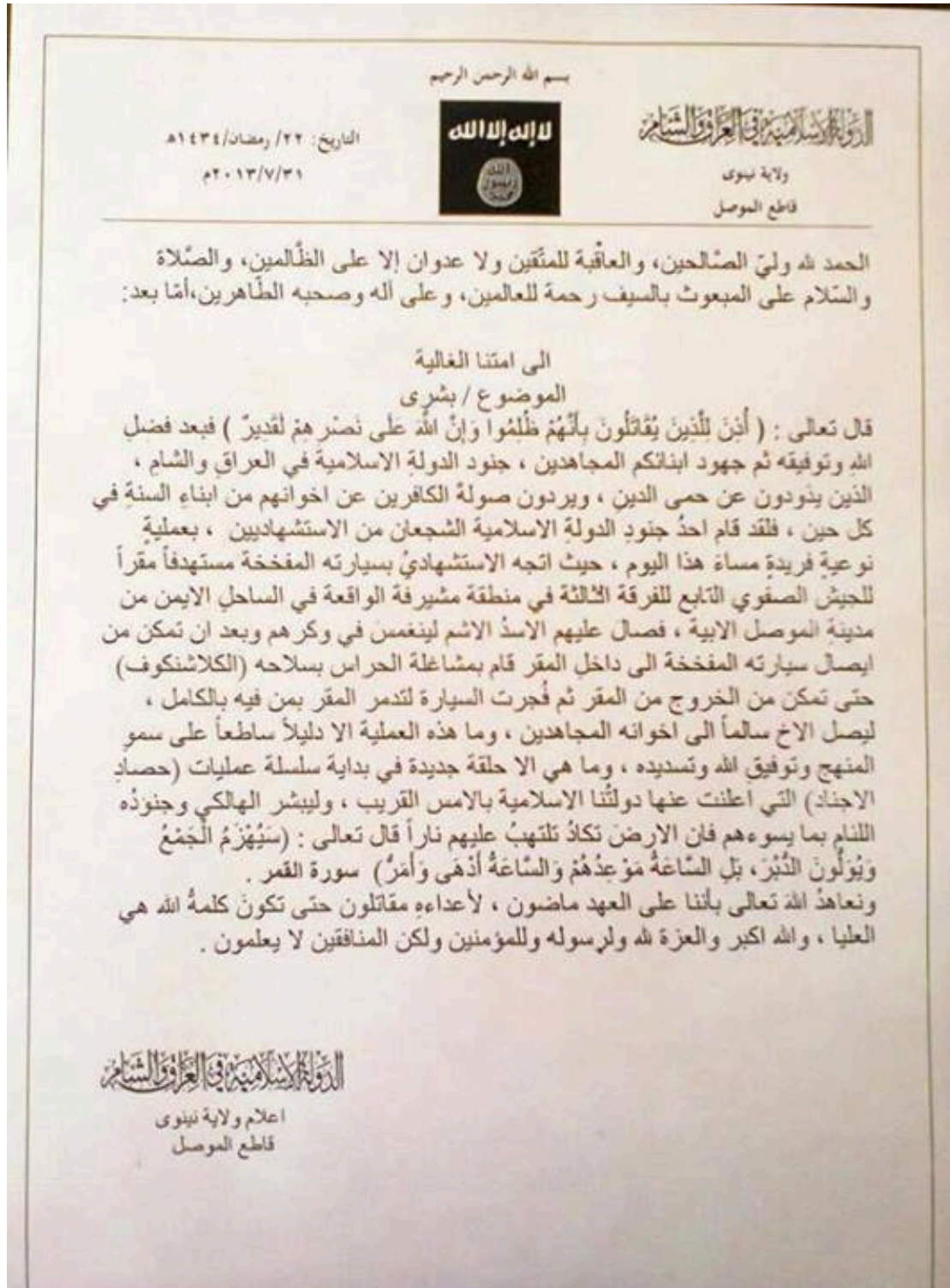


Figure 7: Copy of a statement from ISIS' Mosul branch on an attack against the Iraqi army.

The point is that ISIS in Iraq is increasingly trying to tap into local Sunni Arab grievances. For instance, the theme of alleged cleansing by the Maliki government against Sunnis in the Baghdad belt area has been a [theme at Sunni protests in Diyala province](#). Likewise, allegations of executions of innocent detainees by the government have also featured as protest themes (e.g. see this

[protest rally in Fallujah](#) held by the “Herak” protest movement last month).

Indeed, the “Herak”- arguably the biggest movement among the Sunni Arab protest groups- regularly features reports of mass arrests carried out by the security forces in Sunni areas. Thus, on 28 August, it released a report alleging a [mass arrest against Sunnis in the town of Jurf al-Sakhar](#), southwest of Baghdad and in Babil province (where ISIS has also been active), later [featuring a special report](#) consisting of interviews with people who had been arrested in these operations.

Diyala is a region of particular interest. With a very mixed population of Sunnis, Shi’a (many of whom are [demobilized Sadrist militiamen](#)) and Kurds, it is prone to volatile sectarian tensions. Most notably, on jihadi forums, a [message of support for ISIS and Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) has circulated purportedly from the Diyala town of Muqdadiyah, where over the past several months there have been allegations of encroachment by “sectarian militias,” as [one Iraqiya MP from Diyala indicated](#) in March of this year.

While there are no specific names from back then, it is clear that the allegations largely concern the actions of Shi’a Iranian proxy groups, particularly Aṣā’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), which has certainly tried to expand into Diyala. Indeed, recently Sunni protest Facebook pages featured a photo of a purported AAH funeral convoy in Muqdadiyah for fighters killed in Syria [Figure 8], and claimed this to be an indication of the group’s expansionist efforts in the town and the wider province.



Figure 8: Purported AAH funeral convoy in Muqdadiyah for fighters killed in Syria.

As it turns out, the group in question is not AAH. I should also emphasize that this photo is not original to Sunni protest pages, and by no means am I necessarily the first to chance upon this image. See my colleague Phillip Smyth’s

upcoming work on the actual group behind this photo, including a discussion from him of possible locations of this convoy. However, from my perspective of looking at ISIS' projection of itself as protector of Iraq's Sunnis, what matters more here is *perception*.

Just as pro-ISIS circles in Syria conflate the Syrian Kurdish PYD (traditional leftist with the PKK), so too will Sunni protest and pro-ISIS circles in Iraq be liable to conflate Iranian proxies. The point is, allegations of Shi'a Iranian proxy militia troublemaking have been brewing for quite some time in Muqadiyah and the wider Diyala region, and that is something ISIS can play on to continue cultivating an image as protector of Iraq's Sunnis.

All the above data do not mean that there is no overlap. In the case of Syria, there is no doubt that ISIS also appeals to people in Syria with messages of defending Sunnis (cf. Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Faransi's testimony). However, now that ISIS has strongholds within Syria and is ever seeking to expand its territory beyond town emirates, the ISIS contingent in Syria is starting to advertise its true ideological vision- in line with al-Qa'ida's central leadership of a Caliphate that should eventually take over the world- much more openly.

In Iraq, ISIS does not control towns, and is still seeking to build up its reputation after many years of being perceived as brutal and heavy-handed- indifferent to local concerns- in pursuit of the grand goal of a worldwide Caliphate. Thus, one will not find pro-ISIS circles within Iraq circulating images like that in Figure 2. That said, ISIS is clearly able to conduct most of its operations in the Anbar area and wider western Iraq at will [Figure 9]. Indeed, in the widely publicized video of ISIS' execution of [three Alawites on the Anbar highway](#), it is noteworthy, as Michael Knights points out, that the mujahideen were in no hurry with their stopping, questioning and killing of the three men, illustrating a severe deficiency in control on the part of the Iraqi security forces.



Figure 9: Featuring the familiar ISIS slogan “bāqīya” (‘remaining/steadfast’), Pro-ISIS circles purport to illustrate the group’s virtual free rein in carrying out operations across much of western Iraq and into the Baghdad area.

In terms of the future, I do not think in the long-run ISIS in Iraq can enjoy the level of success it has achieved in Syria despite the attempted shift in imagery

and any growths in popularity it may enjoy, for the simple reason that Syria does not have the same dynamics of conflict as Iraq. Sunni Arabs are a demographic minority in Iraq, the government has well-established security forces (however incompetent), and there is the problem that ISIS is undoubtedly continuing to target Sunni Arabs it sees as government collaborators, including in Sunni areas where attacks are likely to cause ordinary Sunni civilian casualties (e.g. Anbar localities like Fallujah and Ramadi).

As for Syria, the overt emphasis on transnational goals may cause a degree of alienation among locals, but there is no evidence that ISIS in Syria has reverted to brutalization of the populace as happened in the Iraq War. Conversely, I do not see much of an expansion for ISIS beyond northern and eastern strongholds, but from an analytical point of view, the only way its influence could be substantially reduced is in the context of a post-Assad order whereby a large long-term international occupation force (at least a decade or so) is stationed to coordinate an anti-ISIS/Jabhat al-Nusra militia movement, not through vague policies of 'arming moderates.'

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