

## The Islamic State's Acquisition and Use of Chemical Weapons *Assessing Past and Potential Threats*

PART I

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*Part I of this POLICY FORUM issue (Part II is published as POLICY FORUM No. 3) will assess the threat posed by the possibility that the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (IS) could obtain and use chemical weapons (CW). It will first review the salafi-jihadi doctrine of the group and argue that no ideological obstacles prevent it from obtaining and using unconventional weapons. It then reviews IS's current status. Despite the group's loss of territory and the collapse of its quasi-state structure, it will still pose a significant threat to the security of the Middle East/Gulf. Finally, this POLICY FORUM issue will analyze the capabilities and intentions of the hybrid actor to seek, develop and use chemical weapons on the territory of Syria and Iraq. All references appear at the end of POLICY FORUM No. 3.*

### Background and Design of This Issue

On June 29, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the salafi-jihadi extremist group known variously as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and Da'esh (uniformly abbreviated in this text to IS) announced the formation of an Islamic Caliphate. It stretched across large parts of the territories of Iraq and Syria (see Graph on p. 3). The idea of establishing an Islamic Caliphate where sharia law would be imposed is not new among salafi-jihadi groups (Maher, 2017). Yet the actual formation of such a political entity in parts of the Middle East further complicated an already delicate political situation in the region. Despite its initial success, three years after the declaration of the Islamic Caliphate, Iraqi government forces seized control of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri, where al-Baghdadi had made his initial announcement (see Graph in POLICY FORUM No. 3, p. 3).

While the entire POLICY FORUM series deals mainly with the broad range of terrorist-related chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) threats in the Middle East/Gulf, POLICY FORUM Nos. 2 and 3 will focus on the Islamic State's use of chemical weapons – as far as terminology is concerned they are together with biological and nuclear weapons a category

of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), while the notion 'unconventional weapons' is used as a synonym for both CBRN and WMD. The two issues will attempt to analyze this threat by examining the CW-related intentions and capabilities of this hybrid/non-state actor and assess the potential utilization of this category of weapons in the Middle East and possibly Europe (the notion 'hybrid' refers to the time when this group could be considered a quasi-state entity in terms of its structure and the territory it controlled).

The paper will contextualize this threat by comparing IS's CW-related activities with those of other state and non-state actors in the region. It will argue that even though the threat presented by the Islamic State's possible acquisition and use of CW is not currently alarming, it should not be underestimated. In fact, it could become a unifying factor that prompts the international community – and specifically regional actors – to jointly take action. Prior to the analysis, this POLICY FORUM issue at the nexus of academia and policy decision-making, will give an overview of the current state of play in Syria and Iraq by providing an insight into the Islamic State's salafi-jihadi doctrine and the status of its withering Caliphate.

### Salafi-jihadi Doctrine

The creation and evolution of the Islamic

State as a separate group within the salafi-jihadi family of extremist organizations is a result of several factors. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, complemented by indirect support from the Syrian and Iranian governments, provided jihadi fighters with fertile ground to act in Iraq (Azoulay, 2015: 12-13). As a leading jihadi organization, al-Qaeda exploited the opportunity to create a branch in Iraq called al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (AQI) in 2004. The leader of this new branch was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was known for his excessive violence, particularly towards *kafir* (disbelievers) and apostates. The leader of al-Qaeda at the time, Ayman al-Zawahiri, criticized al-Zarqawi's extreme views and activities; nonetheless, al-Zarqawi continued with a campaign of sectarian bloodshed in Iraq (Hassan, 2018: 5).

Another source of inspiration for the use of extremist violence in Iraq can be found in the work of Abu Bakr Naji. The extremist cleric published the book *The Management of Savagery* on the internet in 2004, in which he called for the use of unrestricted and terrifying violence against the tyrants who controlled most Middle East states at the time. This radically affected the character of AQI (Azoulay, 2015: 18). Despite this transformation in the way in which the war in Iraq was conducted, AQI still pledged its allegiance to al-Zawahiri and formed part of the institution-build-

ing process that al-Qaeda called for. The process continued and was consolidated in October 2006 after al-Zarqawi's death with the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq. The group functioned as an insurgency until 2013, when it expanded its operations to Syria.

The civil war in Syria provided a perfect opportunity for the establishment of a jihadi branch in that country. The Islamic State exploited this opportunity and in July 2011 sent a small group of fighters to form a separate armed entity led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani (Hassan, 2018: 3). This entity was called Jabhat al-Nusra, which reported directly to the Islamic State of Iraq rather than al-Qaeda. Nevertheless, al-Julani did not subscribe to the extremist violent doctrine and methodology used by the Islamic State of Iraq, advocating for a more nuanced strategic approach to Syria. Noticing a drift in Jabhat al-Nusra's ideology and actions, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of IS in Iraq, announced a merger of the two groups. However, not all Jabhat al-Nusra elements were subsumed by this merger, leaving a significant portion of the group independent from the Islamic State of Iraq and still pledging allegiance to al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda. This event marked the establishment of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the creation of a rift between IS and al-Qaeda. The two groups developed different viewpoints on many key issues, including *takfir* (excommunication), jihad, the establishment of a Caliphate, and the treatment of individuals (Azoulay, 2018: 19). These differences even sparked armed hostilities between the two groups and led to two distinct movements being formed within the larger salafi-jihadi grouping.

The question of the establishment of a Caliphate became a key component of the two groups' claims of legitimacy and authority. Although it is a key priority for all salafi-jihadis to form the Caliphate, where sharia law would be implemented, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda disagreed on the circumstances required for its creation. Al-Baghdadi advocated for the formation of the Caliphate as soon as possible (Bunzel, 2015: 25-30), while al-Zawahiri adopted a higher threshold for the circumstances in which it could be formed. As mentioned above, the Islamic State announced the establishment of the Caliphate in 2014, which provoked varied

reactions in the salafi-jihadi community. While the al-Qaeda leadership rejected the Caliphate as illegitimate, IS used it as a platform to strengthen its legitimacy and authority, and thus to attract more followers and challenge al-Qaeda's leadership of the salafi-jihadi movement.

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## A Rapidly Diminishing Caliphate

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The gamble of the creation of the Caliphate proved to be an initial success for the Islamic State. At its peak it controlled territory the size of Britain (see Graph on p. 3), where six to ten million people lived, and it had an annual budget of around one billion U.S. dollars, which it obtained from a variety of sources, including tax collection, oil sales, and kidnappings for ransom, among others. Nevertheless, this trend was drastically reversed from 2016 onwards when the global coalition against the Islamic State intensified its military campaign to defeat the organization. In early 2017 the international coalition reported that the once hybrid actor had lost around 62 percent of its territory in Iraq and 30 percent of its territory in Syria, including key centers from which it had operated, such as Fallujah, Mosul, Raqqa, and Palmyra (Valensi, 2017: 1-2). On September 9, 2018 the U.S.-backed coalition began an offensive against the last 200 square miles of territory that the organization controlled around the Syrian city of Hajin (Callimachi, September 9, 2018).

The loss of these territories, particularly the urban centers and oil fields (see Graph in POLICY FORUM No. 3, p. 3), had a detrimental effect on IS's ability to generate revenue (*IHS Markit*, June 29, 2017). Consequently, the Islamic State was no longer able to conduct resource-intensive military operations in the Middle East, supply services to local populations, and attract new recruits. However, even if the Caliphate has been militarily defeated, the threat posed by IS will not disappear in the near future. Although this actor will not have the funds to recruit more members, especially those who are attracted by prospects for material gain, it will still be able to depend on more loyal and committed members who are ideologically motivated to play an active role in the group (Valensi, 2017: 4). Therefore, despite the loss of its hybrid/quasi-state, IS will continue to

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function as an insurgency, exactly as it did prior to the declaration of the Caliphate, and it and will remain a significant threat in the region and globally in the future.

## The Islamic State's CBRN-related Intentions and Capabilities

There is ample evidence that the Islamic State intended to actively develop, acquire and deploy chemical weapons on the battlefield. Based on its brutal operations against military personnel and civilians, and the theological justifications for the use of weapons of mass destruction issued in various fatwas by radical clerics, it is clear that there is nothing preventing the salafi-jihadi group from using such unconventional weapons to achieve its goals. On the contrary, Nasir al-Fahd, a radical cleric who had pledged allegiance to IS, issued a fatwa on WMD in 2003 in which their use was declared permissible as a last resort (Mowatt-Larssen, 2010: 5).

Moreover, while leading AQI, al-Zarqawi attempted to acquire and utilize CW, which demonstrates the group's longstanding desire to obtain and use weapons of mass destruction. Even though CW do not cause high numbers of casualties, they have an extremely adverse psychological effect on civilians, in line with IS's strategy of maximizing terror and violence (Chapman, 2017). In addition, after the establishment of the Caliphate, terrorist fighters in other countries also attempted to obtain unconventional weapons. For example, a laptop confiscated from a Tunisian terrorist fighter contained guidelines for weaponizing bubonic plague and producing the poison ricin (Doornbos/Moussa, September 9, 2014).

There have been many allegations that IS has acquired nuclear capabilities. However, in a recent article the author has downplayed allegations that this organization has materials in its possession that could be used for the development of a modern arsenal. Specifically, the 40 kg of low-enriched uranium stolen from the University of Mosul cannot be used to make a nuclear weapon, because IS has neither the expertise nor the equipment to enrich and install it in a delivery vehicle (Dukić, 2017: 34). There have also been allegations that IS has acquired material from Saddam

Hussein's chemical weapons program at the al-Muthanna site. However, UN reports indicate that the material at the site has been degraded and the bunkers have been sealed, making it both difficult and dangerous to reach this material (Esfandiary/Cottee, October 15, 2014).

The only viable case that can be made is that the Islamic State has started to develop crude CW capabilities as the result of two factors. First, for a time it controlled a significant area of territory where various CW-related compounds could be found, including chlorine and sulfur mustard. Second, IS was able to recruit foreign adherents with chemistry, biology, and engineering backgrounds, as well as former Ba'athist scientists like Abu Malik. Although the Islamic State does not have all the characteristics of a state that are generally needed to start a CW program, the availability of the necessary materials, technical expertise, and know-how, and the relative ease with which chlorine and sulfur mustard can be weaponized, make the production of crude chemical weapons highly possible. ■

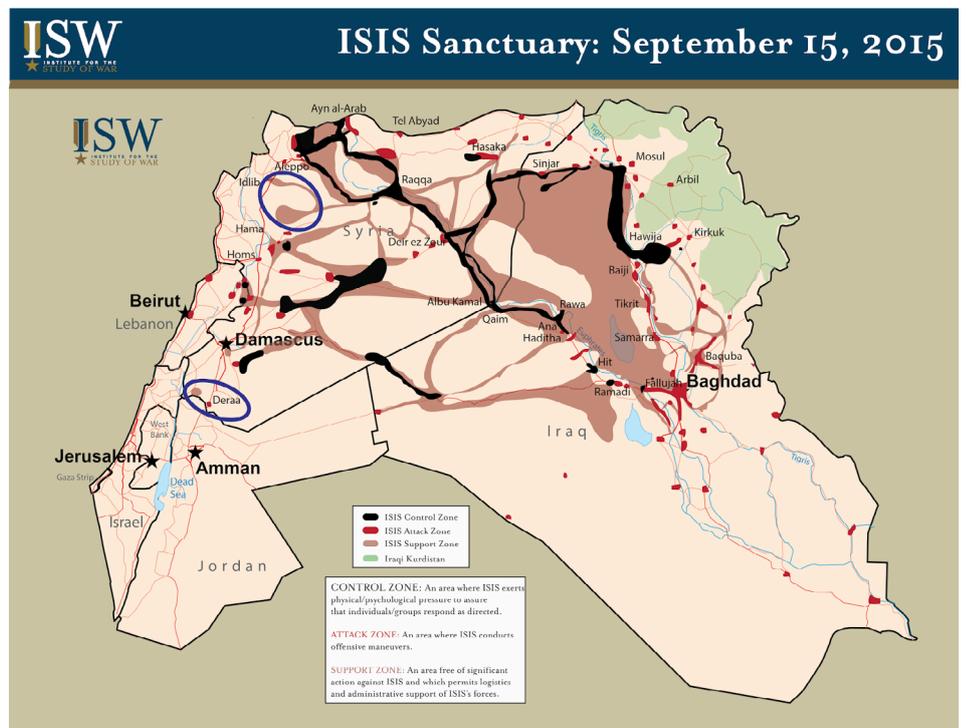
### The Author

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### The 'Successful' IS on Its Way to the Self-declared Islamic Caliphate



Source: Institute for the Study of War. Online available at <https://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2015/09/by-isw-research-team-key-takeaway-isws.html>.