

# International Relations Theory and the 'Islamic State'

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The Islamic State (IS), conventionally known as ISIS/ISIL, was formally launched in 2014 with the purpose of establishing a worldwide Islamic caliphate. IS's organizational flexibility and strategic multilateralism are the outcomes of its development from several regional and global jihadi and insurgent groups. The formation of IS has been a focal point of debate among international security scholars, who, from a variety of perspectives, have attempted to explain the driving forces behind the rise of this Jihadi-Salafi organization (e.g. Gambhir 2015; Gerges 2016; Lister 2014, 2015). These accounts emphasize that the formation of IS was the outcome of both historical and immediate factors that appeared and/or activated in the post-Saddam Iraqi politics. For instance, they connect the development of IS to factors such as the Sunni versus Shiite contestations, the Baathist policies before the US invasion, the US invasion and its consequences, and the post-invasion political development which exacerbated Iraq's sectarian divides. These accounts provide insightful information on the formation of IS and are highly useful in understanding different aspects of the development of this Jihadi organization. However, none of them explain IS in a theoretical framework which would integrate and categorize those causes from micro to macro level. As a result, a multi-level explanation of the rise of IS in the field of International Relations (IR) is missing.

This article examines the root causes of IS by applying the 'levels of analysis' framework, which originally arose from the scholarly debate on causes of war and peace in the international system (Most & Starr 1989; Singer 1961; Waltz 1954), and was subsequently developed by IR scholars into a framework that investigates causes of international phenomena at individual, group, and international levels of analysis (Homer-Dixon 1991; Ibrahim 2018; Yurdusev 1993). Drawing on the 'levels of analysis framework,' this article explains how causes at all three levels of analysis contributed to the emergence of IS in the post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. This approach would provide a more comprehensive and clearer image of the rise of IS by categorizing and discussing the causes of IS at specific individual, group, and international levels of analysis.

Islamic State is the successor of several anti-American insurgent and jihadi groups that primarily merged into al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and subsequently developed to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which ultimately transformed into IS. The process of the evolution of AQI to IS, in general, took 10 years from 2004 till 2014. This article seeks to formulate how multiple causes at different levels of analysis separately and together contributed to the process of the development of AQI into IS. I argue that that personal motivation among individual extremists (at the individual level), Jihadi-Salafism as a group ideology (at the group level), and the US foreign and military policies in Iraq (at the international level), together, made the formation of IS in the post-Saddam Iraq possible. This approach would integrate scattered factors of the rise of IS in a single account providing a multi-level analysis of the formation of this organization.

### Analytical Framework

This article draws on the 'levels of analysis' theory of international relations (IR) which primarily arose from the scholarly debate on causes of war and peace in international politics (see Ibrahim 2018; Singer 1961; Most and Starr 1989). This theory was subsequently developed into a framework which examines the causes of international phenomenon at individual, group, and international levels (Ibrahim 2018; Humer-Dixon 1991).

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At the individual level, individual psychology and motivation are used to explain "civil strife, including strikes, riots, revolutions, and wars" (Homer-Dixon 1991, 104). Scholars, in this level of analysis "suggest that individuals become aggressive when they feel frustrated by something or someone they believe is blocking them from fulfilling a strong desire" (Homer-Dixon 1991, 104-5). At the group-level, scholars use group identity variables such as nationalism, ethnicity, ideology, and religion as causes of conflicts (Homer-Dixon 1991, 105). And finally, at the international level of analysis, scholars consider "external constraints" as a determining force behind the occurrence of international events such as conflicts and wars (Homer-Dixon 1991, 105). Theories that belong to this level of analysis suggest that external constraints motivate actors to engage in war (Homer-Dixon 1991, 105; Choucri and North 1975). Drawing on this analytical framework, this article argues that individual jihadists' "quest for significance" (at the individual level), Jihadi-Salafism as a group ideology (at the group level), and the United States unipolar policies in the Muslim world (at the international level) were the determinant drivers behind the formation of IS. This approach explains why individual jihadists were motivated and capable of forming a jihadi organization with IS lines; how Jihadi-Salafism contributed to the formation of IS; and why both individual and ideological reactions to the US invasion of Iraq factored into the formation of a transnational jihadi organization, rather than other forms of resistance groups such as nationalists.

## Individual Level

The creation of AQI that ultimately developed to IS was the consequence of personal motivations among jihadists and Baathists, in the first place. Most jihadist leaders and combatants who established AQI in 2004 were comprised of former al-Qaeda members and younger international jihadists who, following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, spread all over the Middle East (O'Brien 2011). When the US invaded Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda divided into the "core al-Qaeda," based in Pakistan, and its affiliated groups which spread, at least, in 16 Muslim majority countries from Iraq to Mali to Yemen (McCormick 2014). These jihadists promptly formed several al-Qaeda affiliated groups, one of which was AQI led by Abu-Masab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian Islamist who run a jihadi camp called *Jabhat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* (JTJ) in Afghanistan before the US invasion of the country in 2001 (O'Brien 2011). Al-Zarqawi left Afghanistan in 2002 and moved into the Sunni Triangle of Iraq by the time US forces invaded Iraq in April 2003. Following an agreement with Osama bin Laden in October 2004 Zarqawi changed his group's name to *Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*, known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) which, as discussed above, developed to IS following a decade of interaction with other jihadist and insurgent groups in Iraq and Syria.

Overall, three main individual-level factors led to the emergence of IS: First, personal security and survival concerns among individual jihadists and Iraqi Baathists. Second, an intense personal reaction to the US invasion of Iraq and its consequences. Third, a sense of glory among jihadists for confronting directly the United States in the Middle East.

Concerning personal security, jihadists' search for a safe haven resulted in their reorganization in ungoverned areas of the post-Saddam Iraq. Following the American invasion of Afghanistan most jihadists who escaped the invasion were blacklisted by the US and its allies as highly wanted terrorists. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 finding a safe haven was one of the top priorities of those individual jihadists. Zarqawi and his group were among thousands of international jihadists who left Afghanistan and subsequently proliferated into other Muslim countries in search of a new safe haven. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent collapse of the Iraqi state provided these individuals with ungoverned spaces where they could primarily hide and reorganize. Accordingly, in search of a safe haven, those jihadists ended up in organizing new groups in order to produce an opportunity to fight back. In addition to the international jihadists' search for a safe haven, the American-administered de-Baathification policy in Iraq also created fear among Sunnis in Iraq which, in turn, contributed to the process of the formation of a uniform anti-American and anti-Shiite militant group in Iraq. The de-Baathification policy, ordered by the American-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) resulted in the humiliation, discrimination, and unemployment of hundreds of thousands of former Iraqi civil and military servants who were anxious about prosecution by the Americans and highly fearful of attacks by Shiite militants and Shiite-controlled security forces (Arraf 2003; Cockburn 2014, 70; Woodward 2006, 194-95; Zinn 2016, 3). Thus, the first individual-level root cause of the emergence of the Iraqi insurgency, which ultimately developed into IS, can be traced in the jihadists' search for personal security following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the Iraqi Sunnis reaction to the US de-Baathification policy in 2003. The wanted jihadists and discriminated Baathists were highly prone to interact and cooperate for achieving the common purposes of

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personal security and survival. Under this condition the emergence of an anti-Shiite and anti-American Sunni-led jihadist organization became inevitable. This situation is well articulated in an International Crisis Group report: Sunnis saw their only chance of surviving in Iraq was to fight as Sunnis against a US-sponsored Shiite-led government (Cockburn 2014, 69). The interaction and cooperation between the fugitive extremist Islamists and the well trained Baathists, the Iraq based Sunni insurgency and the transnational Jihadi-Salafist groups gradually transformed into a more organized, strategically complex and operationally flexible organization with IS lines.

The second cause of the emergence of IS, at this level of analysis, was a sense of revenge among both Islamists and Baathists. All Iraq based Sunni insurgent and jihadi group leaders and operatives, before being organized in Iraq, were individually motivated to revenge the Sunnis' oppression by the US and its domestic adversaries, particularly the Shiite-led government in Iraq. Bin Laden personally called upon every jihadi to revenge the invasion of Iraq by conducting attacks against members of the coalition forces in Iraq. Zarqawi added Shiites in the list of his targets, calling upon his followers to target the "global oppressor" and its "domestic compromisor" (O'Brien 2011). IS's declarations and its official documents indicate the significant role of revenge in the formation of the organization. IS leadership labelled their anti-American campaign as a "retaliatory war," and the Dabiq, IS's official magazine, justified the killing of non-Muslims including civilians as a revenge:

Therefore, the Islamic State leadership decided to target the Catholic Christians of Baghdad so as to teach the *thought* of the Copts that the price of Muslim blood is costly and so accordingly, if his church persecuted any Muslim in Egypt, he would be directly responsible for every single Christian killed anywhere in the world when the Islamic State sought it is just revenge... (Dabiq Jan/Feb. 2015, 31-34).

The third determinant cause of the formation of IS, at this level of analysis, was a sense of glory among both jihadists and Baathists for confronting the US and the Shiite-led government in Iraq. Following the fall of Saddam's regime, Sunnis had lost their power, jobs, and political influence to a Shiite-led government, mainly because of the foreign invasion and its support of a Shiite-dominated regime. Therefore, the glory of fighting the US and its domestic ally for restoring the honor became a great motivation to fight among both jihadists and Baathists. Thus, together with a sense of personal security and revenge, a sense of glory directed the scattered jihadist and Baathist militant groups toward the formation of a jihadist organization with IS lines. Although a sense of revenge could be considered as the most significant stimulus among oppressed Iraqi Sunnis for creating an IS-type organization, the sense of glory was the motive that drove jihadists of different origins to establish and join a homogenous militant organization to fight on behalf of their coreligionists. As Abu Dujana, a British IS fighter stated "... Helping the oppressed is better than having a red [European] passport" (Lister 2015, 60).

## Group Level

In group level, Jihadi-Salafism is a major factor and a sense-making context for the emergence of IS. Jihadi-Salafism is a specific strand of the Salafi ideology which provides a particular interpretation of Islam and international politics. This ideology includes four major characteristics: definition of a problem, characterization of an enemy that causes the problem, a method of action to resolve the problem, and an ultimate goal. Almost all founding declarations and official statements of major Jihadi groups including al-Qaeda and IS are shaped around these elements (e.g. Al-Adnani 2014; Bin Laden et al. 1996, 1998; Al-Zawahiri 2001a, 2001b). These documents and statements consider the invasion of Muslim lands by non-Muslims as the problem, define the US and its allies as the enemy, characterize jihad and the formation of jihadi organizations as the method, and describe the formation of an Islamic state as the ultimate goal. This ideology justifies violence and considers every Muslim individual responsible in doing battle on behalf of their coreligionists (Gerges 2011, 67). Evidence shows that all these elements played causal role in the formation of IS.

Before the formation of IS, transnational jihadists and the anti-Shiite and anti-American Sunni insurgents had adopted and internalized this ideology which, in turn, unified individuals and groups of different origins toward achieving a specific goal, the formation of an Islamic state. The early leaders of the Iraq-based jihadist groups, including Zarqawi, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir were Salafi *stalwarts* (Bunzel 2015, 10). The first official spokesman of IS, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, even taught the writings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-

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Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, to fellow jihadists (Bunzel 2015, 10). IS's official publications are little more than quotations from early Islamist scholars, along with quotes from the caliphs, the Prophet's companions and the original Islamic texts. The two founding declarations of IS, "This is the Promise of Allah" and the "Khilafah Declaration," are two main examples of the group's Jihadi-Salafist nature. The group's ideological nature has its origins in Zarqawi's worldview and his statements. As early as in a 2003 statement Zarqawi, then the leader of JTJ, combined all main aspects of the jihadi-Salafi ideology as dimensions of his global jihadi project. The statement was quoted repeatedly in IS declarations and by its leaders (Hashim 2014).

Furthermore, IS clearly embraces the four-fold basic elements of jihadi-Salafism which include describing a problem, an enemy that causes the problem, a violent approach to fight the enemy, and an ultimate political goal which is the creation of an Islamic Caliphate or state. These elements are well-explained and underlined as the group's essential norms in IS's founding documents, particularly in "This is the Promise of Allah" and the "Khilafah Declaration."

"This is the Promise of Allah" describes the oppression of Muslims and the invasion of their lands by Americans and their far and near allies as the existing "problem" of the Muslim world. Likewise, the declaration defines the infidel nations of the West as the enemy. It also considers jihad as the method to fight the enemy and resolve the problem. And finally, the declaration highlights the expansion of a "Sharia-based" Islamic State over the Muslim lands as its ultimate goal (see Al-Adnani 2014). Moreover, IS has stated Jihadi-Salafism as its founding ideology more explicitly in Dabiq. Dabiq's first issue, for instance, describes concretely the "crusader armies" suppressing Muslims as the problem, the non-Muslim world led by a Judeo-Crusade alliance as the enemy, jihad as the method and the expansion of the Islamic State over the Muslim lands as the goal (see Dabiq, June 2014, p. 33).

Drawing on Jihadi-Salafism, IS formalized the Islamic State's status as the "renascent caliphate" in 2014 claiming authority over all Muslims and Islamist groups. The newly proclaimed Islamic State called upon all Muslims throughout the world to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi as the caliph (Al-Adnani, 2014). Thus, Jihadi-Salafism not only played a causal role in the formation of IS, but it also contributed to the group's expansion by justifying its authority over Muslim societies and other Islamist groups and factions.

## International Level

The Islamic State is not only about domestic politics or Muslim affairs, but it is also about international politics. IS's international goal, the establishment of a sharia-based transnational Islamic State, is highlighted in almost all Dabiq issues. The organization's insistence on international goals has its origins both in the organization's ideology and the international environment in which IS emerged. The ideological roots of the emergence of IS are discussed in previous section and the international environment which contributed to the group's establishment is the concern of this section.

In addition to being influenced by causes at individual and group levels, the formation of IS was also the outcome of causes at international level. At this level of analysis, factors rooted in the US invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) significantly contributed to the establishment of this jihadi organization. At least, three factors can be considered as the main international level causes of the emergence of IS. First, the US invasion of Afghanistan which led to the escape of thousands of international jihadists from Afghanistan seeking new sanctuaries and an opportunity to reorganize in other places from South Asia to the Middle East. Second, the US invasion of Iraq and its domestic consequences, particularly, the de-Baathification of Iraq's civil and military sectors led to the discrimination of Sunnis forcing them to join the newly emerged anti-American and anti-Shiite insurgency in Iraq. Finally, the regional consequences of the US invasion of Iraq, particularly the Saudi Arabia vs. Iran rivalries on sectarian lines in the region.

Concerning the first factor, the most influential masterminds and founding members of the movement were jihadists who fled Afghanistan following the US attacks on al-Qaeda and the Taliban in October 2001. After the US invasion of Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda members and its affiliates fled the country, partly moving into Iraq even before the US invaded the country in early 2003. Zarqawi's JTJ was one of those groups that escaped Afghanistan in early 2002. Fleeing from Afghanistan and traversing into Iran, Zarqawi and his group slipped into Northern Iraq sometime in

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2002. By the time US forces invaded Iraq in March 2003, Zarqawi had established a small JTJ base in Biyara in the Kurdish province of Sulaymaniyah which mostly included Jordanians, Syrians, and Kurds who either escaped from Afghanistan or had been working with the Kurdistan-based jihadi group, Ansar al-Islam (Felter & Fishman 2007, 4). As discussed, this group developed into the backbone of AQI following the US invasion of Iraq which ultimately transformed into IS in 2014.

Concerning the second factor, IS was the outcome of the US invasion of Iraq and its domestic consequences including the collapse of the Iraqi state and the de-Baathification policy. For example, Zarqawi highly benefited from the state collapse in Iraq moving into ungoverned areas of the Sunni Triangle following the collapse of the Baathist regime. Moreover, Zarqawi's campaign of recruiting from among Iraqi Sunnis and the expansion of an anti-American and anti-Shiite jihad in Iraq was highly benefited from the de-Baathification policy of the CPA. Following the de-Baathification of Iraq's armed forces, thousands of 'de-Baathified' soldiers and officers joined the insurgency among which AQI was the most effective one. Thus, the US invasion of Iraq which had motivated primarily jihadists of different nationalities to join the anti-American jihad in Iraq, pushed the domestic elements to join a process that ultimately resulted in the formation of IS.

Concerning the third factor, the US invasion of Iraq entailed regional consequences which, in turn, contributed to the establishment of IS. Following the demise of Saddam's regime and the establishment of a Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad, the regional power struggle, particularly the Sunni vs. Shiite politics in the Middle East was exacerbated. After the collapse of Saddam's regime, Iran emerged as the most influential regional power in Baghdad. A Shiite-dominated regime in Baghdad was not acceptable to Saudi Arabia, whose doctrine of Wahhabism, does not recognize Shiites as true Muslims. As a result, Iraq became a scene of power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The increasing Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia highly contributed to the polarization of Iraq along a Sunni-Shiite line which created the environment that allowed IS to rise in the Sunni part (Gerges 2016, 20; Fisher 2016). Using the environment, IS elements considered the anti-Shiite sentiments as an asset in creating sanctuaries in Sunni areas where they received enormous support. IS's primary cells and networks developed into a more coherent and uniform organization in this environment.

## Conclusion

The driving forces behind the formation and expansion of IS, as a transnational Jihadi-Salafi organization which initially sought to disturb the regional status quo in the Middle East by establishing a transnational and cross-border Islamic caliphate, is complex and multidimensional. A comprehensive investigation of this complexity requires an inclusive approach. Scholarly work on the formation of IS has contributed extensively to this end by including both the historical and immediate factors in their explanations. Drawing on findings in existing scholarly work, this paper investigates the driving forces behind the formation of IS from a different perspective. Using the 'levels of analysis' framework, this article investigates the causes of IS at three individual, group, and international levels. This method would allow integrating causes of IS at all levels of analysis, studying the process of the formation of the organization systematically, and developing a representative image of the case.

This article highlights the individual jihadists and Baathists' search for personal security and survival, their desire for revenge, and their motivation to participate in a global jihad as causes of the formation of IS, at the first level of analysis. At the second or group level of analysis, this article focuses on Jihadi-Salafism as the major driver behind the rise of IS. Finally, at the international level of analysis, this article searches the origins of the formation of IS in the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (2001-2003) and their domestic and regional consequences.

Integrating the root causes of the formation of IS in a systematic framework gives an inclusive and representative image of the formation of this organization. This multi-level approach helps to examine the formation of IS from multiple dimensions and in different contexts. It allows the search of determinant factors of the formation of IS from micro to macro levels organizing them in a well-known framework in the field of IR. Moreover, this article aims to motivate IR scholars in applying conventional theories beyond studying inter-state issues. Taking the emerging international events by non-state and asymmetric actors in consideration, this method would enrich the field by expanding its domain beyond great power politics, inter-state affairs and conventional warfare.

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