

Islamic State of Iraq Commemorates its Two-Year Anniversary

By Pascale Combelles Siegel

IT HAS BEEN a difficult year for the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Created in October 2006 as al-Qa`ida in Iraq's (AQI) emirate, the ISI was intended to be a precursor for the restoration of a Taliban-like caliphate over the Middle East. Since its inception, however, the ISI has been rebuffed by rival insurgent groups, battered by coalition operations and undermined by local Sunni tribes. Yet, during the end of September, the ISI's leaders celebrated the state's two-year anniversary. The celebration came well in advance of the actual anniversary, as the "state" was established on October 15, 2006. The ISI released Abu Hamza al-Muhajir's "State of the Prophet" speech on September 19, while the al-Furqan Institute for Media Production released its commemorative video on September 22 and Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi's "Promise to Allah" speech appeared on September 24. By releasing its messages well in advance of October 15, the ISI avoided the fate of al-Qa`ida's delayed 9/11 celebration.¹ The ISI's technical success, however, does not overshadow the challenges the group has faced in its two-year existence. The setbacks of the past year have made the glorification of the ISI a tough sell. To mitigate that difficulty, the ISI released a three-prong argument defending its legitimacy, celebrating its past accomplishments and vowing to achieve final victory.

Defending the ISI's Legitimacy

The transformation of AQI into an "emirate" proved a controversial move. As the ISI tried to coerce other rival groups into coming under its fold and as it imposed strict rules in the areas it controlled, discontent grew and it led to a serious reversal in the ISI's fortunes. By spring 2007, pundits and rival insurgents made their disagreements public. Salafi-jihadi commentators argued that the state declaration did not meet jurisprudential criteria

1 On September 10, the first tier of al-Qa`ida's websites went down for a full week, preventing al-Sahab from disseminating its 9/11 anniversary video in a timely and orderly fashion.

for establishing an emirate.² Rival insurgents appealed to Usama bin Ladin to rein in al-Qa`ida's Iraqi franchise, and they openly fought AQI fighters on the ground.³

In the face of this unfavorable context, it was incumbent upon Abu Hamza al-Muhajir,⁴ the ISI's minister of war and AQI's *amir*, to defend the Islamic state. In an hour-long speech, al-Muhajir chose to cast the difficulties aside and reframe the debate by focusing on the ISI's legitimacy. His argument was clear: the ISI is "related to the concept of the state of the Prophet,"⁵ referring to the time when the Prophet Muhammad established his rule in Medina after the migration of 622 AD. As part of this argument, since one should not question the legitimacy of Medina, then one should not question the legitimacy of the Islamic State of Iraq. Al-Muhajir argued that the situations in Medina and Iraq are comparable. As Medina was a battleground where a pious minority faced a larger, better-equipped enemy, so is Iraq. As Medina was plagued by disease, hunger and insecurity, so is Iraq.

Equalizing the circumstances in Medina and Iraq allows al-Muhajir to justify the ISI's current tactics and policies. During the Prophet's time, surveillance of others was necessary to ensure the Prophet's safety, the Prophet and his companions carried weapons to defend themselves, looting helped weaken the Prophet's enemies, and coercing community leaders into supporting the Prophet was justified. All of these circumstances, according to the ISI, apply today. This comparison serves three purposes. First, it is designed to end the controversy over the ISI's legitimacy by appealing to what most Muslims consider sacred: the time of

2 "Prominent Islamist Kuwaiti Sheikh Questions Religious Legitimacy of the Islamic State of Iraq, Calls to Dissolve it," Middle East Media Research Institute, April 27, 2007.

3 For a detailed description of the ISI's rivalry with other insurgent groups, see Evan Kohlmann, "State of the Sunni Insurgency in Iraq: August 2007," The NEFA Foundation, August 2007.

4 Abu Hamza al-Muhajir has been identified as an Egyptian known as Abu Ayyub al-Masri.

5 Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, "A Lecture Entitled: The State of the Prophet," al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, September 19, 2008.

the Prophet Muhammad. Second, it allows al-Muhajir to promote the ISI as the embryo of great accomplishments to come, just as Medina was the precursor to a larger and more powerful Islamic state. Third, it helps al-Muhajir downplay the significance of the ISI's lost grounds and de-link the question of the ISI's eventual success from its tactical and operational successes. Although he acknowledged that the ISI lost territory during the past year, al-Muhajir argued that the modern statehood standard of territorial control is not the correct yardstick to measure either the ISI's legitimacy or strength. This argument is likely to please jihadists who commonly rail against the nation-states that have divided the Muslim umma. Yet, the argument goes in part against what the ISI boasted two years ago when it made a point to showcase the size of its geographical control.⁶

Reframing the ISI's Achievements

After addressing the issue of legitimacy, the ISI's al-Furqan media group released an hour-long video on September 22 showcasing the state's achievements. The video was a montage of previously released footage and speech excerpts. It contained graphic content (such as the extrajudicial executions of Iraqi security forces) but stayed away from the most gruesome clips that established the reputation of AQI under the leadership of Abu Mu`sab al-Zarqawi. Instead, the video touted the ISI's "achievements." Some claims were expected, such as the assertions that the ISI has "exhausted the occupation and its tails,"⁷ helped shrink Iranian influence in Iraq, and protected "the Muslims who pray our way."⁸

6 "The Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq: Announcing the Establishment of the State of Iraq," al-Fajr Media Center, October 15, 2006.

7 To drive the point more convincingly, the video uses external "experts" to discuss the toll that the "resistance" has inflicted on U.S. forces. These experts do not necessarily distinguish between the various branches of the insurgency, yet it appears that they are specifically speaking about the ISI.

8 This is a veiled reference to the fact that the ISI intends to support those Sunnis who accept the basic tenets of its ideology (Salafism and jihadism). It can be construed from this euphemism that the ISI's protection extends to a small portion of the Sunni population.

The video also vaunted the fact that the ISI has been able to restore Shari`a on “acts and individuals, committees and customs, regimes and everything.”⁹ The video explained that the restoration of Shari`a was accomplished in an orderly fashion and implemented implacably. To support its claim, the video showed the sentencing and execution of people declared “apostates.” This framing will, no doubt, satisfy the Salafi-jihadis who feel that maintaining the purity of the faith is the most important duty

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for Muslims. It was, however, the ISI’s (and before that AQI’s) ruthless implementation of its extremely strict interpretation of Shari`a that helped turn locals and tribes against it. The ISI’s draconian interpretation of Islam appeals only to a small minority of Muslims, its unwillingness to compromise makes it harder to find reliable partners, and the unflinching implementation of its principles generates hostility and opposition.

The video then analyzed the ISI’s military achievements. Although the ISI routinely releases substantial accounts of “successful” attacks against coalition forces,¹⁰ the commemorative video chose to ignore these fates and focused on the development of military technology. For example, with footage of men working on various devices and ammunitions as background, a caption indicated that an individual was

9 “Remarkable Release: Two Years With the Islamic State,” al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, September 22, 2008.

10 For example, in mid-September 2008 the ISI released two summaries of military operations it claimed to have conducted in August 2008. In the two statements, the ISI took credit for conducting 755 military operations, for killing 1,701 “enemies” and for wounding 608 more.

manufacturing rockets with chemical warheads. This part of the video was anti-climactic with a paltry staging that undercut the rather dramatic announcement. Nothing indicated that the device shown contained any chemicals. Unsurprisingly, the video also boasted that the ISI was developing a long-range missile capable of reaching Tel Aviv. The ISI has long claimed that it is an “advanced post to be the gate to the conquest of Jerusalem from the Jews.”¹¹ Advertising a new weapon capable of reaching Tel Aviv is designed to show supporters that the ISI is working to “liberate Jerusalem.”¹² The ISI and al-Qa`ida’s leaders have repeatedly argued that Iraq is a “stepping stone” for the liberation of Jerusalem.

The most surprising claim made in the video regards the assassination of Shaykh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha, a founder of the Anbar Awakening Council, who was partially responsible for driving the ISI out of Anbar Province. The shaykh was killed on September 13, 2007 in a high-profile attack just a few days after publicly meeting with President George W. Bush. The video clip showed a man, with his face blurred, reading in front of a camera. The ISI claimed that he was the suicide bomber who killed Abu Risha. The claim is unverifiable, but the video spells a different account from the official version. At the time, the ISI did not release details of the operation citing operational security needs.¹³ U.S. and Iraqi sources, however, reported that a roadside bomb, not a suicide bomber, killed Shaykh Abu Risha, and nothing to date has contradicted those reports. By portraying the attack as a suicide bombing, the ISI may be seeking to aggrandize its role and capabilities.

11 “Remarkable Release: Two Years With the Islamic State.”

12 For more details on this issue, see Pascale Combelles Siegel, “Looking to the Levant: Internationalizing the Iraqi Insurgency,” *Terrorism Monitor* 6:5 (2008).

13 The original claim said: “Your brothers in the Ministry of Security [were able] to trace and assassinate... Abdul Setar Abu Rica...in a heroic operation which was prepared for more than one month.” See Islamic State of Iraq, “Eliminating the Grandson of Abu Regal, Abdul Setar Abu Rica,” al-Fajr Media Center, September 14, 2007.

Predicting Final Victory

After justifying the legitimacy of the state and boasting of its achievements and capabilities, the pinnacle of the celebration is a lengthy statement from ISI leader Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi making the case, once again, why jihad against the United States is absolutely necessary and a personal obligation that no self-respecting Muslim can skirt. Al-Baghdadi did not address any of the complex issues; instead, he gave a general “pep talk” designed to entice as many Muslims as possible to support the jihad. He did not discuss the crisis of legitimacy, the grounds lost to the coalition and to the Awakening Councils, or the controversial tactics that have turned many Iraqis against it; instead, al-Baghdadi refocused the debate on the necessity to undertake jihad against the Americans. His speech was general and inclusive. Al-Baghdadi defined the struggle in Iraq as a defensive jihad, whereby the United States is attacking Islam and the Muslim nation and imposing “injustice and tyranny.” In this context, al-Baghdadi argued that all able Muslims are obligated to undertake jihad to defend “religion and creed.” Quoting from the Qur’an, al-Baghdadi said: “Permission to fight is given to those who are fought against because they have been wronged.”¹⁴

As if to provide further incentive, al-Baghdadi emphasized the inevitability of the mujahidin’s success since their fight takes place under God’s auspices. With victory all but certain, al-Baghdadi offered all Muslims a chance to participate in the successful defense of Islam. To those who may doubt the final victory considering the current setbacks, al-Baghdadi offered reassurance. God, he said, works in mysterious ways and “fulfills His promise when He wants and according to His desires.”¹⁵ How and when victory will come remains a mystery that man cannot pierce. The subtext of this claim is two-fold: it is not worth discussing the setbacks because only God can explain them, and no matter what the coalition and its allies try it will not have any bearing on the ultimate victory.

14 Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, “The Promise of Allah,” al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, September 24, 2008.

15 Ibid.

Al-Baghdadi closed his appeal by celebrating the mujahidin who have taken “the path to righteousness” and by calling on all Muslims who have strayed to come back to the path of jihad or face dire consequences. “If you refuse to repent before defeat over you,” he warned, “then by Allah the killing of an apostate is dearer to me than 100 heads of Crusaders.”¹⁶

Conclusion

Contrary to al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State of Iraq managed the technical release of its commemorative speeches and videos without glitches. Nevertheless, the technical success cannot overshadow the fact that the setbacks of the past year have made glorifying the “state” a tough sell. The commemoration messages highlight some of these difficulties, forcing the ISI into a defensive position. The fallback line of defense serves two purposes: first, it unsurprisingly uses the Prophet and his era to justify the ISI’s current actions; second, it tries to refocus the debate on the need for every Muslim to engage in what is a justified defensive jihad. There is no doubt that the ISI’s celebration is overshadowed by its current difficulties, but it does not mean that its appeal will go unanswered.

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¹⁶ Ibid.