



START

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Branding, Leadership Culture and Lethal Attraction

*Report to the Office of University Programs,
Science and Technology Directorate, U.S.
Department of Homeland Security*

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About the Report

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About START

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is supported in part by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through a Center of Excellence program based at the University of Maryland. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. For more information, contact START at infostart@start.umd.edu or visit www.start.umd.edu.

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Executive Summary

The *Leadership of the Extreme and Dangerous for Innovative Results* (LEADIR) study uses an industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology approach to assess ideological organizational features (e.g., structure, leadership, and marketing) in relation to their capacity for innovative and violent performance. The scope of the present effort was to conduct a VRIO analysis¹ on the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a violent extremist organization (VEO) with rapidly increasing influence in the “Global Jihad Industry.”

Using an internal strategic organizational analysis, we found support for the hypothesis that the Islamic State is a durable movement in the geographic region it currently controls. There are three strategic resources and capabilities that we posit will allow ISIL to become a durable movement: (1) unique leadership style and structure, (2) state-of-the-art cyber usage (e.g., tailored messaging; resilient and diverse technology), and (3) organizational legitimacy in an unstable region.

The leadership style and structure of ISIL differ from those we have analyzed in more than 90 VEO leadership teams. This particular characteristic is not only rare, but also would be difficult to replicate in another group given the historical conditions that gave rise to ISIL, as well as the participatory style that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has with his close followers (see section on Leadership/Human Capital Resources).

The cyber sophistication of ISIL shows the expertise and diversity of its cyber and media team. After profiling this group’s use of cyber technologies for over a year, we have determined that they use a variety of technological platforms, diverse languages, and tailored messaging. The cyber technologies facilitate internal coordination (e.g., command and control) and focused information flow externally with the broader Umma and potential foreign fighters (see section on Cyber Capabilities).

Organizational legitimacy has resulted from a unique combination of the strong leadership style, strategic branding, and consistent message. In other words, “ISIL Sells Success.” Our conclusion is that this strategy of promoting itself as a successful organization and with a pure mission (ideological superiority) leads to a perception of organizational legitimacy, which is particularly magnetic in an environment that is rife with corruption, poor governance, and distrust of existing institutions (see section on Organizational Legitimacy and Branding).

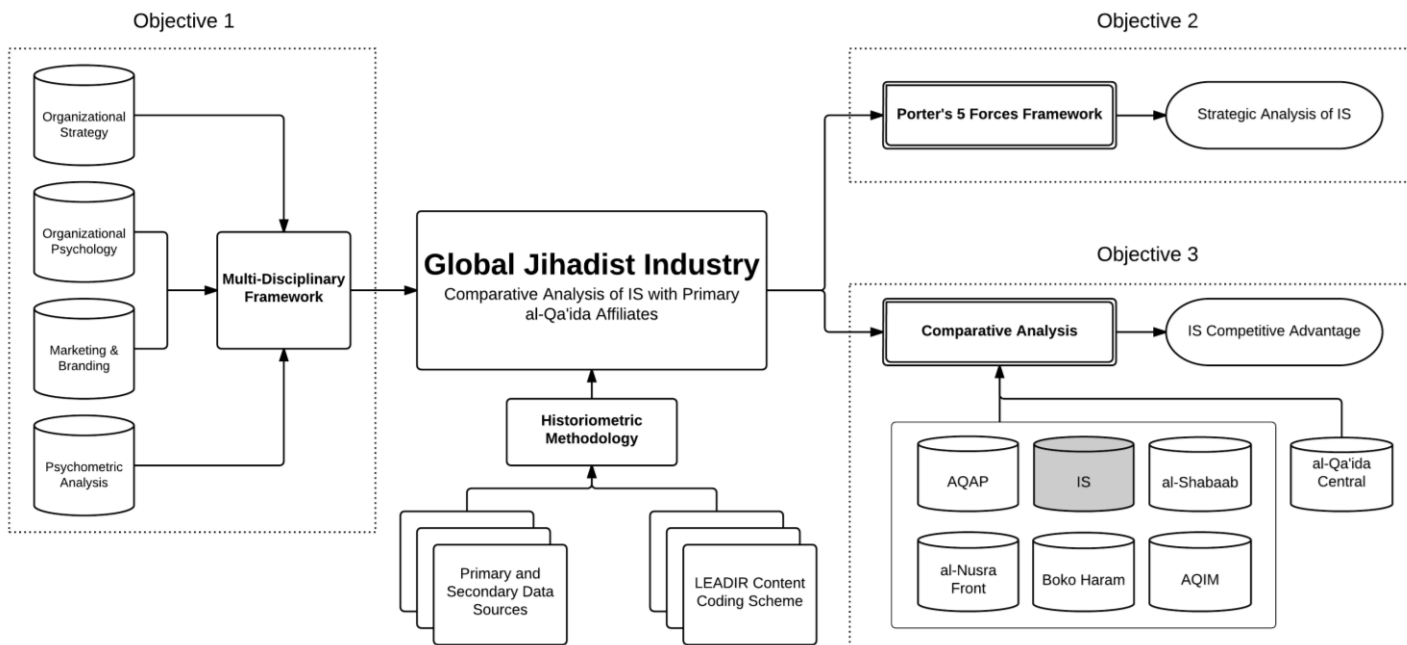
In the full report, we offer unique insights gained from examining ISIL through a business model. Using this strategic management lens, we found support for the hypothesis that ISIL is a durable movement in the geographic region it currently holds because of its rare, unique, and inimitable resources and capabilities.

¹ A VRIO analysis is an acronym for a four-question framework used to determine the competitive potential of a resource or capability within a larger industry; Specifically, this framework assess whether a resource or capability is Valuable, Rare, easy/difficult to Imitate, and susceptible to exploitation by Organization.

Project Overview

Drawing from a team with diverse academic expertise, we examined ISIL from the organizational strategy literature, organizational psychology literature, and marketing/branding literature using unclassified primary and secondary sources. Figure 1, below, illustrates the overall flow of the project.

Figure 1. Strategic Organizational Profile Method Overview



A two-part framework was applied to provide the organizational profile of ISIL. First, an industry analysis was conducted with first-level affiliated groups of al-Qa'ida Central (AQC). Specifically, a Porter's Five Forces framework was applied to evaluate potential opportunities and threats to global jihadist violent extremist organizations (VEOs). This "industry analysis" provided an outline of relevant pressures in the global jihad "industry" as well as salient opportunities and threats.

Second, we conducted an internal strategic analysis of ISIL to identify what resources and capabilities ISIL controls (either internally or through strategic alliances) to develop and deliver its services to sympathizers and current members. Our specific report focused on the human and organizational resources and capabilities leveraged by ISIL, rather than surveying the population they try to influence.

Finally, we conducted a VRIO (Value, Rare, Imitable, Organization) analysis² to evaluate the competitive implications of the resources and capabilities controlled by ISIL, specifically, the likelihood of ISIL

² As cited in the Executive Summary, a VRIO analysis is an acronym for a four-question framework used to determine the competitive potential of a resource or capability within a larger industry. Specifically, this framework assess whether a resource or capability is valuable, rare, easy/difficult to imitate, and susceptible to exploitation by the organization.

developing and maintaining a viable regional caliphate. We executed this project via three research objectives, and the following sections detail our method and findings for each.

Research Objective 1: Perform strategic analysis to identify potential opportunities and threats to the global jihad “industry”

The structure-conduct-performance (SCP) model was originally developed to identify industries in which perfect competition was not operating. The SCP model argues that industry structure (e.g., number of organizations, homogeneity of products, cost of entry and exit) determines organizational conduct (e.g., the strategies firms pursue), which in turn informs the performance of organizations in the industry.³ Extending the logic of the SCP model, Porter’s Five Forces framework⁴ is the predominant method for conducting industry level analysis. Porter’s Five Forces framework provides direct insights into the profitability or success of an industry by detailing five specific forces that act as threats: (1) Threat of Entry, (2) Threat of Rivalry, (3) Threat of Substitutes, (4) Threat of Suppliers, and (5) Threat of Buyers. The strength and relative importance of each of the five forces was evaluated through a subset of determinants and supported with both qualitative and quantitative data collected concerning ISIL using unclassified primary and secondary documents.

Industry level analysis examines forces that work on or against the “industry” in which ISIL operates, based on the stated ideology and competition for sympathizers to that ideology. Thus, for the present effort, we selected the industry of **Global Jihad Affiliates of al-Qa’ida Central** which consists of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, al-Shabaab, al-Nusra Front, Boko Haram, and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), as our unit of analysis. While ISIL is no longer affiliated with al-Qa’ida, the prior relationship, stated objectives, and proximity make this a viable comparison group of the global jihad industry.

Research Objective 2: Identification of strategically relevant organizational resources and capabilities controlled by ISIL

Application of the Five Forces framework served to identify the relevant forces in the global jihad industry and provide insights into the opportunities and threats facing all organizations in the industry. However, in order to evaluate the long-term sustainability and performance of ISIL, a VRIO analysis of the resources and capabilities controlled by ISIL was necessary (a VRIO analysis is an acronym for a four-question framework used to determine the competitive potential of a resource or capability in terms of whether it is valuable, rare, easy/difficult to imitate, and susceptible to exploitation by the organization).

³ Bain, J. S. (1968). *Industrial Organization*, 2nd Edition. New York: Dow Jones-Irwin.

⁴ Porter, M. E. (1980). *Competitive Strategy*. New York: Free Press.

VRIO analysis evaluates the likelihood that an organization will obtain a sustainable advantage in a given competitive arena.⁵ Competitive advantage references an organization's ability to create more value than its rivals. A key determinant of competitive advantage is the resources and capabilities controlled by the organization. Subsequently, the first step in conducting a VRIO analysis of ISIL was to identify strategically relevant resources and capabilities controlled by the organization.

Research Objective 3: Determinants of ISIL competitive advantage

The second step in a VRIO analysis identified and evaluated each strategically relevant resource or capability on four dimensions: value, rarity, imperfect imitability, and organization. Organizations possessing only *valuable* resources and capabilities are expected to perform the same as all other organizations in the industry (i.e., competitive parity). Organizations possessing valuable and rare resources and capabilities are expected to perform *better* than other organizations but only for a short period of time (i.e., temporary competitive advantage), while organizations possessing *valuable, rare, and imperfectly imitable* resources and capabilities are expected to demonstrate a long-term advantage (i.e., sustained competitive advantage). Imperfect imitability of a resource or capability was determined by the presence of one or more of the following attributes:

- (1) History – the focal resource or capability was acquired at a *particular* place and time in the past. Competing organizations are unable to imitate that resource or capability because they are operating in a different place and time (e.g., senior military leadership of ISIL who came from Saddam Hussein's regime).
- (2) Causal ambiguity – Competing organizations are unable to imitate the focal resource or capability because of its complexity, tacit, and/or intangible attributes (e.g., social media and cyber sophistication).
- (3) Social complexity – Competing organizations are unable to replicate the focal resource or capability due to its presence within a sectarian conflict that has its own magnetism (e.g., public discontent with the Assad regime).

The overall organization of ISIL (i.e., structure) must also be aligned in such a way as to take advantage of the resources or capabilities in question. If ISIL is misaligned, competitive disadvantages may emerge even though resources and capabilities are valuable, rare and difficult to imitate.

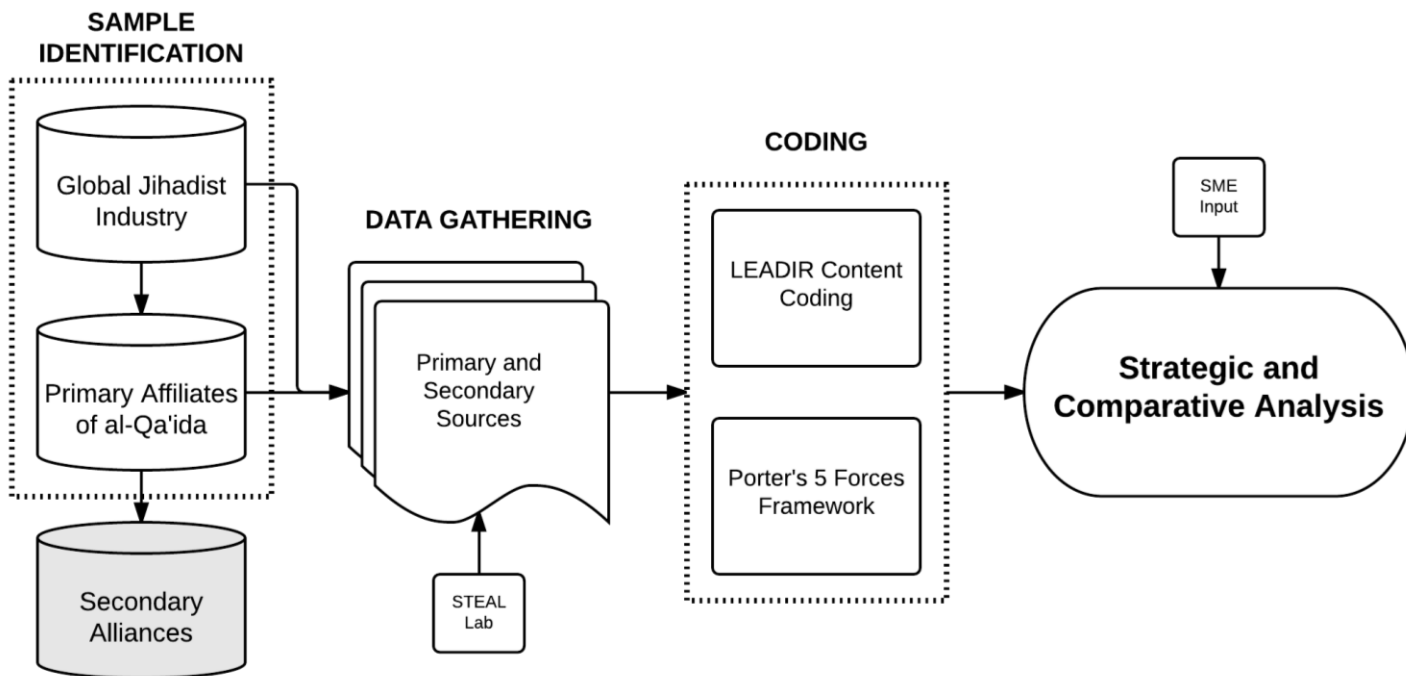
⁵ Barney, J. (1991). Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage. *Journal of Management*, 17, 99-120.
http://business.illinois.edu/josephm/BA545_Fall%202011/S10/Barney%20%281991%29.pdf

Method

Overview

This project employed a historiometric methodology (Figure 2) in order to evaluate the strategic and comparative threat posed by ISIL. Following the steps described by Ligon and colleagues,⁶ we defined the sample that would provide the best comparative attributes to evaluate the Islamic State within the larger framework of global jihadists. After identifying the sample, we gathered data from primary and secondary sources, evaluated the organizations in our sample using the LEADIR (Leadership of the Extreme and Dangerous for Innovative Results; DHS S&T funded START CSTAB 1.12 project) content coding scheme, indices of technical capabilities and sophistication, and the Porter’s Five Forces framework.⁷ Finally we conducted analyses to identify organizational attributes and resources that differentiate ISIL from other competing organizations with the global jihad industry and may contribute to the continued threat posed by this organization.

Figure 2. Overview of the Historiometric Method⁸



⁶ Ligon, G., Hunter, S., & Harris, D. (2012). Quantifying Leader Lives: What Historiometric Approaches can tell us. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 23, 1104-1133.

⁷ Porter, M. E. (1980). *Competitive Strategy*. New York: Free Press

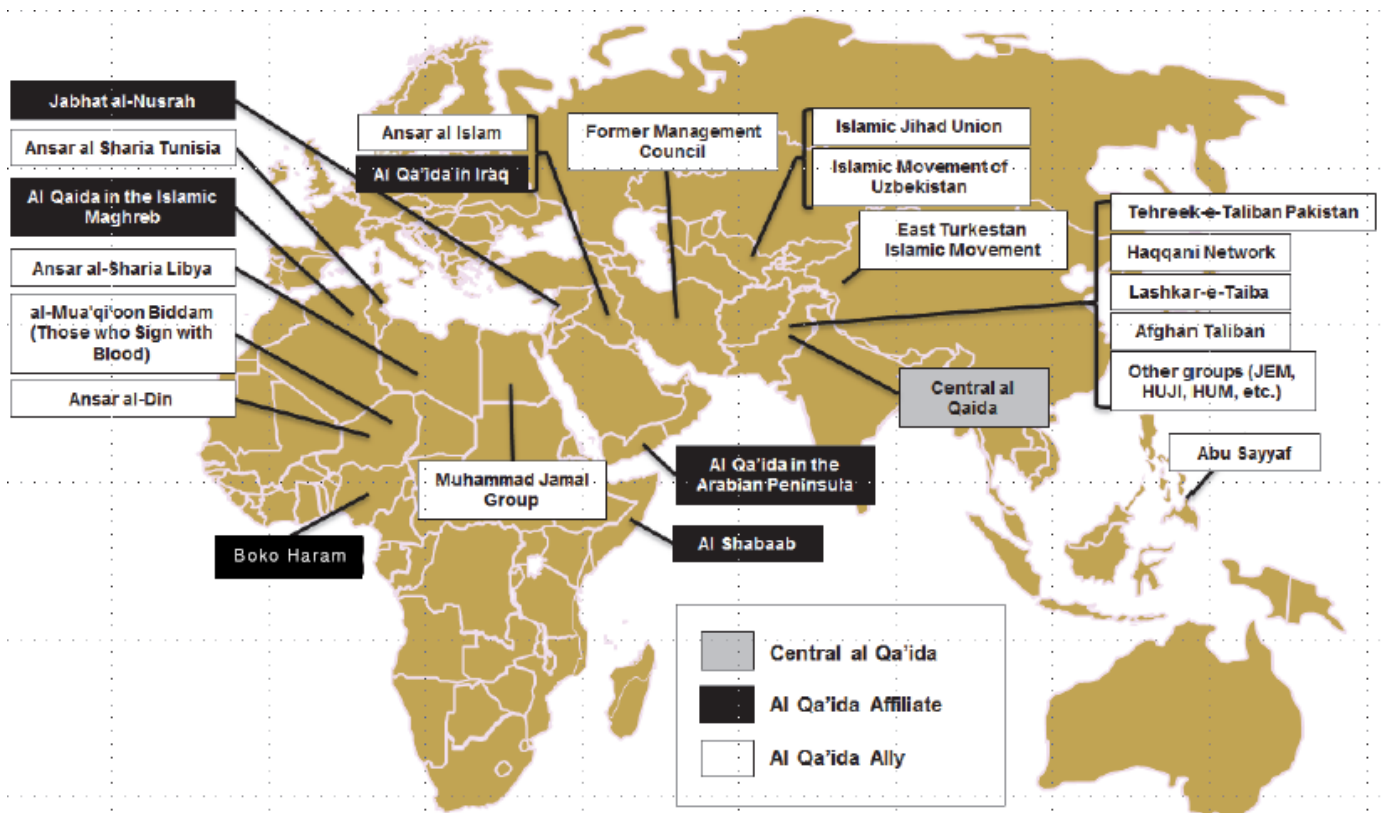
⁸ For a full explanation of the historiometric method in the study of VEOs, please refer to the LEADIR project (Ligon, Harms, & Harris, 2014) through START.

Sample Definition

Once we identified the “industry” in which ISIL operates (Global Jihad Affiliates of al-Qa’ida Central), we partnered with a DoD subject matter expert (SME) familiar with al-Qa’ida associated movements (AQAM) to select key players within the industry that would offer the best comparison of attributes highlighting similarities and differences between ISIL and their competition. Specifically, we focused on affiliates of al-Qa’ida Central who reflect the highest degree of allegiance between the emir and al-Qa’ida senior leadership (AQSL). Given that ISIL was formerly an affiliate of AQC, this was considered the most appropriate sample for comparison, because by nature of forming those alliances (with the exception, perhaps, of AQAP⁹), the ideology, tactical operations, and targeting preferences of the affiliates were shaped by AQC. For the scope of this project, we compared organizations that are considered ISIL’s primary competition within the industry of Global Jihad Affiliates of al-Qa’ida Central: al-Shabaab, al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusrah), al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Boko Haram.

⁹ As opposed to the other affiliates, who existed as independent groups before aligning with AQC (e.g., AQIM was previously an Algerian group, Boko Haram was previously a Nigerian group), AQAP is essentially a branch of AQC that took on a Yemeni constituency, as opposed to a Yemeni group that became globally (rather than locally) focused.

Figure 3. Map of Al Qa'ida Affiliates and Allies¹⁰



Data Gathering

This research employed an open-source, historiometric methodology¹¹ to gather information about the organizations. Secondary data gathered from academic and government sources were the main sources we used for the present effort (e.g., profiles and data from START, Southern Poverty Law Center, FBI, Mapping Militant Organizations by Martha Crenshaw), but information was also gathered online from scholarly case studies, public-records databases (e.g., Lexis-Nexis). We also used primary documents from the organizations themselves, such as manuals, propaganda, videos, and websites run by the organizations. In addition, for the leadership assessment of al-Baghdadi, we relied upon primary speeches obtained by the John Hopkins' team from the Open Source Center for this effort. Information and data resources were gathered by graduate students in both I/O psychology and Information Science and Technology, trained in the study of ideological organizations and employing similar search tactics and filtering processes. This ensured that (1) any gathered data were from reputable sources and (2) sufficient data were found for a variety of organizational characteristics (e.g., leadership, formalization). Data that was found to be conflicting between sources were further investigated, with information from

¹⁰ Map by RAND corporation; Modified by the project team; Original image retrieved September 17, 2014 from <http://counterjihadreport.com/tag/al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula>

¹¹ Ligon, G., Hunter, S., & Harris, D. (2012). Quantifying Leader Lives: What Historiometric Approaches can tell us. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 23, 1104-1133.

the academic and government resources (e.g., START) being the primary sources to determine the nature of the data. If START data was not available for a particular index, the coders followed a hierarchy of reputable sources to determine what information would be used to make the assessment. All coders, in order to reduce bias and ensure the quality of the data being coded, followed this procedure.

Some of the data sources we reviewed for this research contained web content (e.g., videos, audio statements, websites, propaganda) from potential adversaries that may be unsafe to access from unsecure computers. Thus, we utilized the Information Assurance (IA) labs within our College of Information Science and Technology (ISIL&T) for this purpose. In this way, we were able to protect our resources from any computer malware that may have been included in the download. We used one of the STEAL rooms in the IA College in order to extract potentially harmful web data for our record, since much of this data is subject to removal from the Internet. STEAL is the acronym for Security Technology Education and Analysis Laboratory, used to name facilities that are specific to Information Assurance education and research. The STEAL facilities provided our research team education and research opportunities to explore security technologies, malicious software, and websites and tools that are potentially harmful to other computers. This software includes viruses, worms, and other potentially harmful code, which cannot be examined in a normal user-room or classroom setting. Once we accessed the web material that we needed in order to extract the data within the STEAL lab, we were able to execute various tools (e.g., “wget” downloads to store computer code and receive a return of the PHP and other domain identifiers used in the organization’s webpages and social networking sites; that facilitated our ability to evaluate these organizations in a comparative way. This data was used to view potentially corrupted data (such as leader videos posted to non-secure webpages) and to evaluate the program language used by these organizations.

Coding and Analysis

One of our main research objectives for this report was to identify key areas where ISIL differs from other organizations within a competitive industry in order to assess key resources and capabilities that may contribute to their escalating power and legitimacy within the global jihad movement. In order to accomplish this, we coded the organizations in several ways. First we used the organizational predictors and criterion that apply to ideological organizations from the LEADIR project.¹² These scales can be obtained in the full codebook available from START, for CSTAB project 1.12. The scales we used to code each organization were developed using a psychometric approach to scale development. For each category of variables (i.e., organizational characteristics, performance-related constructs, and controls), operational definitions with readily identifiable benchmark examples were developed. Coding schemes were developed with the same practices used in psychometric test development.¹³ For example,

¹² Ligon, G., Harms, M., & Harris, D. (2014). *Leadership of the Extreme and Dangerous for Innovative Results*. Project completed for the START consortium. Please contact START or the PI Gina Ligon for more information on this project.

¹³ Osterlind, S. J. (1983). *Test Item Bias*. Series: Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences (SAGE University Papers 30, Sage Publications, Inc.)

behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS) of objective markers were developed based on the sample at hand to provide coders with anchors for the assessment of complex features and performance. In addition, these BARS were defined, iteratively reviewed, and edited by a subset of SMEs in test item writing to ensure clarity, parsimony, and uni-dimensionality. Second, we used the available web materials of the organizations to assess their cyber sophistication and expertise. These materials were accessed using the STEAL lab, and evaluated by technical SMEs to determine the sophistication of their resources, which in turn reflects their internal expertise. Finally, we used a VRIO analysis to evaluate key differences between the organizations in terms of resources and capabilities. This analysis was used to complete research objectives 2 and 3. The overview of organizational characteristics and performance attributes that were coded to provide the data for this effort can be found in Appendix A.

Coder Training

Raters (three I/O psychology graduate students) underwent 40 hours of training in the theory underlying violent organizations, ideological organizations, and organizational structure, as well as best practices in historiometric coding and developing shared mental models about each construct to be coded. To ensure that shared mental model, coders first individually rated 10% of the organizations and then met to discuss their ratings to reach a better understanding of each organizational characteristic and preliminary organizational-level performance construct. Before meeting, interrater reliabilities were calculated to be above .90 for organizational characteristics and .80 for organizational performance, which are adequate levels of interrater agreement.

Analyses

The primary analyses used for this project were descriptives, correlations, and between subject ANOVAs (analysis of variance). These analyses allowed us to compare ISIL and other organizations within their industry in a way that told us if there were statistically significant differences. In addition to statistical analyses, we used SMEs to determine differences between organizations on overall constructs of interest, discussed further in subsequent sections. The results of these analyses and case evidence are provided throughout the remaining sections of this report.

Research Objective One: STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF GLOBAL JIHAD INDUSTRY

The structure-conduct-performance (SCP) model was originally developed to identify industries in which perfect competition was not operating. The SCP model argues industry structure (e.g., number of organizations, homogeneity of products, cost of entry and exit) determines organizational conduct (e.g., strategies firms pursue), which in turn informs the performance of organizations in the industry.¹⁴ Extending the logic of the SCP model, Porter's Five Forces framework¹⁵ is the predominant method for

¹⁴ Bain, J. S. (1968). *Industrial Organization*, 2nd Edition. New York: Dow Jones-Irwin.

¹⁵ Porter, M. E. (1980). *Competitive Strategy*. New York: Free Press.

conducting industry level analysis. Porter's Five Forces framework provides direct insights into the profitability or success of an industry by detailing five specific forces that act as threats. The strength and relative importance of each of the five forces was evaluated through a subset of determinants and supported with both qualitative and quantitative data collected concerning ISIL using unclassified primary and secondary documents.

Industry-level analysis examines forces that work on or against the "industry" in which ISIL operates, based on the stated ideology and competition for sympathizers to that ideology. Thus, for the present effort, we selected the industry of **Global Jihad Affiliates of al-Qa'ida Central** (e.g., al-Shabaab, AQIM, AQAP, Boko Haram, al-Nusra Front, and ISIL) as our unit of analysis. While ISIL is no longer affiliated with al-Qa'ida, the prior relationship, stated objectives, and proximity make this a viable comparison group of the global jihad industry. In addition, the previous alliance between ISIL and AQC make comparison with this industry valid, as many of the affiliates of AQC were ideologically influenced by the global al-Qa'ida franchise.

There are five factors on which an industry is typically evaluated for a strategic analysis using this framework: (1) Threat of Entry, (2) Threat of Rivalry, (3) Threat of Substitutes, (4) Threat of Suppliers and (5) Threat of Buyers. Each of these forces has a subset of determinants that represent the data (either qualitative or quantitative) that were collected about ISIL. The following sections detail each of these forces as they relate to global jihadist VEOs.

Threat of Entry

Threat of Entry generally describes factors that prohibit additional VEOs from entering the "Global Jihad Market" and competing with the currently existing organization(s) for resources such as sympathizers, members, and fundraising sources. One key question to ask when evaluating this external pressure on the global jihad industry is, "could any group come in and state they are global jihadists?" Organizational theorists who examine this in more conventional industries ask questions concerning: economies of scale, differentiation, proprietary technology, and privileged access to resources. For example, in the pharmaceutical industry, it is recognized that economies of scale, distribution channels, and human capital make it difficult for new firms to break into the industry. Thus, the pharmaceutical industry is said to have a LOW Threat of Entry.

When examining the broader landscape of AQC affiliates with global jihad goals, it appears that there is a HIGH Threat of Entry into this industry, suggesting increased difficulty for industry incumbents in recruiting members, raising finances and mobilizing other resources as new global jihad VEOs enter the industry and compete for scarce resources. For example, Figure 3 illustrates the major AQC affiliates and secondary allies. These groups occupy different regions and likely play upon unique grievances of local populace (e.g., AQAP ideology centers on grievances in Yemen, such as water shortages, while Boko Haram focuses on grievances toward the poorly managed Nigerian government), but to become part of the "industry" of global jihad they do not need to declare allegiance to any existing organization (i.e.,

commitment to the ideology that the West is at war with Islam meets the criteria for being a global jihadist). In fact, recent reports about cell in Australia inspired to align with ISIL suggested that the group needed only, “a knife, a cell phone, and a victim.”¹⁶ *Thus, we rate the Threat of Entry as HIGH for the global jihad industry, given the limited requirements to become part of the industry.*

Threat of Rivalry

Threat of Rivalry captures the degree of competition in the industry; for example, industries with high numbers of rivals (within a defined subgroup), offering the same intangible and tangible characteristics (e.g., group membership, chance for excitement), and high exit barriers (i.e., high penalties and sunk costs for abandoning initial organizational cause) are characterized as having a high Threat of Rivalry. The restaurant industry provides one example of increased rivalry, with numerous organizations offering similar products. Rivalry results in a reduction of profits as incumbents must aggressively compete for market space.

In the context of the global jihad industry, our data would suggest that the Threat of Rivalry is HIGH. Given the current instability in the region, the recent history of perceived grievances from Sunnis in Iraq and Syria living under the Maliki and Assad governments respectively, and perceived lack of alternative pathways to change in the Middle East, violent political organizations have proliferated.¹⁷ As suggested by the map in Figure 3 and recent research by Byman,¹⁸ there are currently high volumes of organizations claiming a global jihadist ideology, many of which are in the same industry of al-Qa’ida affiliates as ISIL.

Threat of Substitutes

Substitutes refer to the products and services of other industries that meet similar needs of the consumer, but in a different manner. The Threat of Substitutes increases as: consumers (in this case, sympathizers) become aware of potential substitutes; the price of substitutes decreases; performance of the substitutes improves; and switching costs are low. For example, in the telecommunications industry, Internet -based communication services (e.g., Skype) became a viable substitute for cell phones when marketing campaigns highlighted the low costs and availability of products and services.

While there are many alternative options for global jihad or Sunni power (within Syria, there are currently fewer options within Iraq), the existing competition is comparatively low in performance and reliability. Specifically, groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Free Syrian Army offer opportunities for Sunni activists both inside and outside of Iraq and Syria. However, these groups may not be considered an adequate substitute for ISIL in terms of power and group safety for vulnerable

¹⁶ Perlez, J. (2014). http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/27/world/asia/isis-australia-mohammad-ali-baryalei.html?_r=0

¹⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/04/jihad-fatal-attraction-challenge-democracies-isis-barbarism>

¹⁸ Byman, D. (2014). Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations. *Security Studies*, 23, 431-470.

Sunni Muslims in Iraq and Syria under the current governments. For example, while the current Iraqi government has some positions open for Sunni representation, it is unclear based on past performance whether this non-violent alternative will provide an adequate solution. In addition, while counter-campaigns by the United States may denigrate ISIL for Muslims who are on the cusp of joining ISIL (e.g., the “Think Again/Turn Away” campaign referenced in Figure 4 which was intended to dissuade potential recruits from joining ISIL by illustrating consequences), these campaigns do not offer a substitute or alternative for vulnerable individuals to gain power and group membership. *Thus, we evaluated the Threat of Substitutes as MODERATE for the global jihad industry, which has implications for counter-messaging and strategy.*

Figure 4. Think Again/Turn Away Heat Map of Drone Strike in Mid-Attack



Threat of Suppliers

Threat of Suppliers references the ability of the suppliers to reduce industry profits by increasing prices, limiting supply, or passing costs forward to industry incumbents. Suppliers are able to pressure incumbents and reduce industry profitability when there are a limited number of suppliers to an industry, the goods or services being supplied are differentiated, and no alternative product or service is available. The likelihood that the supplier will enter and compete in the industry (i.e., forward vertical

integration) and the importance of the industry for the suppliers also contributes to the overall Threat of Suppliers. For example, the jewelry industry is subject to a high Threat of Suppliers as diamonds are differentiated, supplied by a few powerful organizations (De Beers Group controls over 50% of the world's diamond supply) and less likely to be substituted with other inputs.

In the context of global jihad VEOs, the Threat of Suppliers is LOW. Suppliers to the global jihad industry include weapons dealers and sympathetic individuals, organizations and nations. Suppliers provide a wide array of resources including weapons as well as financial and human capital. Because the suppliers are fragmented and come from a variety of backgrounds and domains (e.g., nation states, wealthy donors, members of diasporas), there is no “one” supplier who can control the fate of VEOs in the global jihad industry as seen in other industries more reliant on a supplier (e.g., the jewelry industry mentioned above).

Threat of Buyers

Threat of Buyers captures the influence of the buyers on industry performance. The Threat of Buyers is high when there are numerous industry organizations offering undifferentiated products or services to a limited number of buyers. Low industry growth and the possibility of the buyers entering the industry (i.e., backward vertical integration) also contribute to an increase in the Threat of Buyers. Examples of buyer/supplier relationships with a high Threat of Buyers include general discount stores such as Walmart, Costco, and Target (there is limited differentiation between Target and Walmart in terms of the products they provide customers/buyers). In addition, there are not many “sunk costs” associated with buyer switching (choosing to shop at Target instead of Walmart). In the case of discount stores, therefore, the Threat of Buyers would be high, due to the diverse options and competition for potential consumers of this industry.

With respect to global jihad VEOs, the Threat of Buyers is MODERATE. The potential presence of two factors informs our assessment of the Threat of Buyers. First, there is a risk that various tactics and ideological orientations subscribed to by ISIL may alienate the constituency (i.e., the local community). Second, as the Iraqi and Syrian governments implement certain changes directed toward reconciliation with the Sunni population, the perceived benefits offered by ISIL may decrease. The primary buyers of the services of global jihadist VEOs are individual followers, drawn to the movement for ideological (e.g., legitimacy of ISIL's caliphate) and non-ideological (e.g., safety) reasons. For the purposes of this analysis, we differentiate between two segments of “buyer”: local fighters in the region and foreign fighters. For local fighters, it appears that Threat of Buyers is LOW, as there are few substitutes with the current opportunities being offered by ISIL, and the industry VEOs are highly differentiated from each other in Iraq¹⁹ (e.g., the global jihad VEOs are highly differentiated across the regions where they operate and the missions they sell). For ISIL in particular, there appear to be fewer substitutes for the opportunities

¹⁹ This is less true in Syria given that al-Nusra Front is an off-shoot of AQI, and both al-Nusra Front and ISIL oppose the Assad regime, and therefore they may be seen as ideologically congruent to local fighters

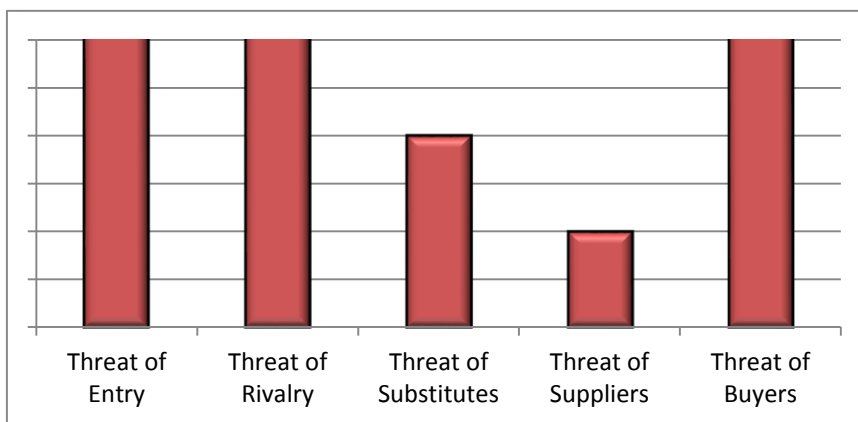
they're offering, and the group has made distinct efforts to differentiate itself²⁰ from other global jihad groups. In addition, the threat of backwards vertical integration (or some of the current buyers/sympathizers forming their own group) appears high given the autonomy granted to certain cells and nature of leaders in place across the global jihad VEOs. Finally, for the foreign fighters, it appears that they have a HIGH Buying Power, as there are many groups to choose from, costs for switching from one to another are low, and there are a large number of potential buyers/sympathizers in general.

Summary of Research Objective One: Overall Strategic Assessment of Global Jihad Industry

This model provides an analytical frame to gather information about the global jihad industry, assess its strengths and weaknesses, and to assess the level of competitiveness across VEOs such as ISIL, AQC, AQAP, and others. When using this model for conventional organizations, it is useful in driving strategy formation. For example, in the airline industry, there is fierce competition between the two large producers Airbus and Boeing. However, there is low threat of entry for new organizations (because of the unique expertise and personnel needed to run these organizations). Thus, Boeing and Airbus make a strategic decision to focus on marketing strategies that differentiate them from each other rather than new entrants into the industry.

In the present context, the three major weaknesses of the global jihad industry are the 1) Threat of Entry, 2) Threat of Rivalry, and 3) Threat of Buyers. Table 1 indicates the relative industry profile for the Global Jihad Industry based on this assessment from our SMEs of the data we gathered for the present effort. In short, the VEOs who enter this industry need to work diligently at differentiating themselves for potential buyers and suppliers. It seems this is a key strategy of ISIL, which has implications for how they perform over time.

Table 1. Porter's Five Forces Strategic Industry Analysis Applied to Global Jihad VEOs



²⁰ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html

Research Objective Two: IDENTIFICATION OF STRATEGICALLY RELEVANT ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES AND CAPABILITIES CONTROLLED BY ISIL.

Examination of the global jihad industry through the Five Forces framework served to identify relevant opportunities and threats. While the Five Forces framework is useful in predicting industry performance, it provides few insights into the performance of a specific organization within an industry. Subsequently, organizational scholars examine and compare the resources and capabilities controlled by the firms to determine which organization is likely to succeed. A frequently employed method for evaluating the long-term sustainability and performance of an organization is a VRIO analysis.

VRIO analyses²¹ evaluate the likelihood that an organization will obtain a sustainable advantage in a given competitive arena. Sustainable competitive advantages are argued to originate from the resources and capabilities controlled by the organization. As such, the first step in conducting a VRIO analysis of ISIL was to identify strategically relevant resources and capabilities controlled by the organization.

Resources

Resources represent the tangible and intangible assets controlled by the organization. Resources can be financial (e.g., cash), physical (e.g., equipment, natural resources), human (e.g., knowledge, intelligence, training, creativity) and organizational (e.g., reporting structure, culture, planning and control mechanisms). A review of both the quantitative and qualitative data indicated several strategic resources controlled by ISIL.

Leadership and Human Capital

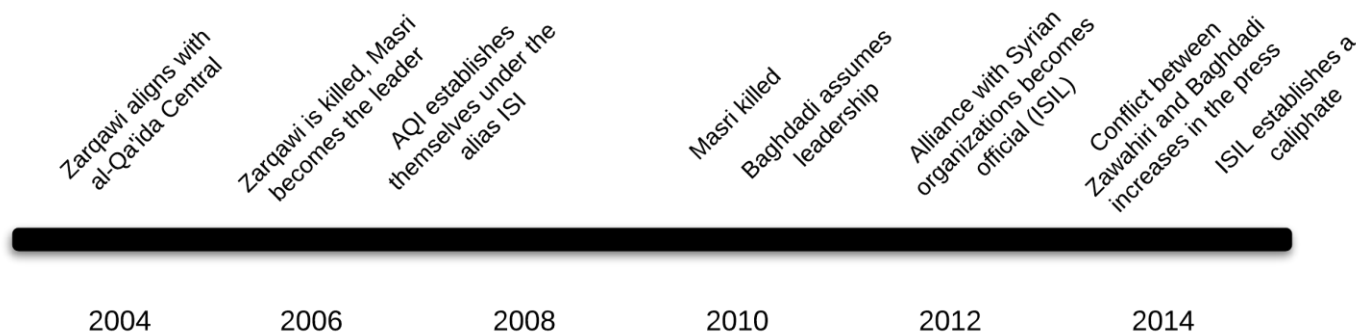
The Islamic State organization²² has had several leadership changes²² over time, experiencing three primary leaders over the past decade. The founding leader of al-Qa'ida in Iraq was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi and his followers executed several notable attacks during his tenure, such as the videotaped beheading of businessman Nicholas Berg. Being a personalized (i.e., self-serving, self-aggrandizing) charismatic (i.e., attention seeking, malleable goals) leader, Zarqawi showed extremely high performance in the short term, but the performance of AQI/ISIL suffered following his death in 2006 due to his lack of information sharing and succession planning among top commanders. Zarqawi is also credited with forming the official alliance with AQC. The subsequent leaders, Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (also referred to commonly as Abu Du'a) were both socialized leaders (i.e., participatory, power

²¹ As cited in the Executive Summary, a VRIO analysis is an acronym for a four-question framework used to determine the competitive potential of a resource or capability within a larger industry. Specifically, this framework assess whether a resource or capability is Valuable, Rare, easy/difficult to Imitate, and susceptible to exploitation by Organization.

²² Note that for the sake of consistency and clarity, we are referring to them as ISIL, with the acknowledgement that this organization has had several aliases over the years (e.g., Jama'ah Tawhid w'al Jihad, al-Zarqawi Network, al-Qa'ida in Iraq, the Mujahidin Shura Council, the Islamic State of Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Levant (ISIS/ISIL), and the Islamic State).

sharing, focused on organizational growth not personal power), with Masri being socialized ideological (i.e., authoritative, emphasis on traditions and norms, invoke light and dark imagery to emphasize an enemy)²³ and Baghdadi being socialized pragmatic (i.e., analytical, incremental steps toward mission achievement, flexible). One primary difference between socialized and personalized leaders is their use of personal pronouns within public speeches.²⁴ Personalized leaders (e.g., Zawahiri, Zarqawi, and Shoko Asahara from the Aum Shinrikyo) use more “I” and “my” pronouns in their speeches and tend to be much less participative/power sharing leaders. Consequently, organizations led by personalized leaders tend to suffer following the removal of that leader,²⁵ as they have failed to adequately succession plan with their top management team. Under the leadership of al-Masri and al-Baghdadi, ISIL has been much more stable at accomplishing goals and objectives (socialized leaders tend to engage in more succession planning with top advisors, and thus organizational performance tends to survive leadership decapitation), which is a facet of their unique leadership styles. Figure 5 illustrates the major events that occurred in relationship to the leadership of ISIL over time.

Figure 5. Leadership Changes in ISIL over Time



Zarqawi played an important role in ISIL’s history by gaining public notoriety for the organization. His downfall as a leader was his concern with receiving credit for the group’s activities rather than accomplishing the ideological mission. Consequently, ISIL suffered in terms of performance when he was killed in 2006. When second-in-command Masri assumed leadership of ISIL, it took almost a year for their performance to increase to previous levels. Part of his success as a socialized ideological leader was in attracting more followers to the organization, and in re-branding the organization to better represent their cause. It was under his leadership that ISIL also assumed the alias “the Islamic State in Iraq.” This allowed the organization to separate their identity from AQ Central, while still highlighting their shared goals. Following Masri’s capture in 2010, Baghdadi assumed the leadership role of ISIL. Baghdadi, a

²³ Other examples of *socialized ideological leaders* include Usama Bin Laden, former leader of AQC. Socialized ideologues are often extremely powerful leaders in extremist organizations because they strongly emphasize a return to traditional values and norms, and place their own role within the organization as secondary to the larger mission, which can be highly inspirational.

²⁴ House, R. J., & Howell, J. M. (1992). Personality and Charismatic Leadership. *Leadership Quarterly*, 3, 81-108.

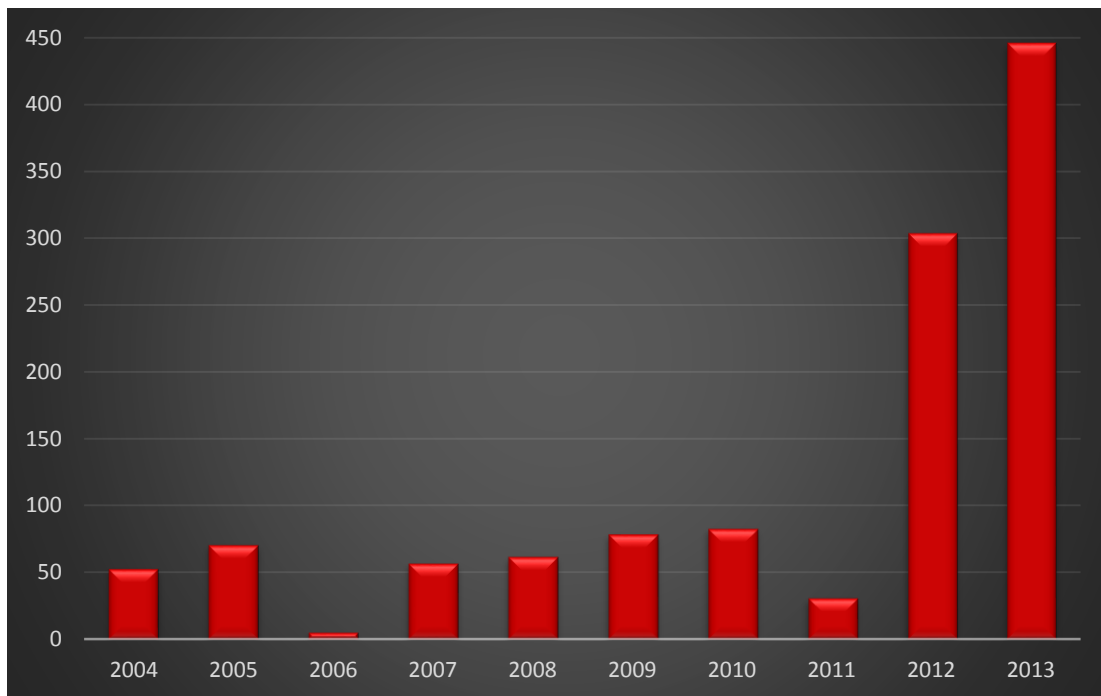
²⁵ Harms, M., Ligon, G., & Harris, D. (2014). Deadly Persuasion: How VEO Leaders Influence Lethal Performance. Presented at the *Academy of Management Annual Conference* in Philadelphia.

socialized pragmatic leader, has been extremely effective at strategizing and accomplishing objectives, most recently credited for the establishment of a caliphate. The seizure of weapons, ability to generate funds, and building infrastructure make ISIL one of the best-resourced terrorist organizations in history. In addition, the orchestration of prison breaks to populate ISIL with hardened and experienced personnel is another indication of an effective leadership to grow the organization using innovative strategies. Baghdadi has several interesting characteristics, relative to many VEO leaders, not the least of which is his pragmatic approach to leadership,²⁶ evidenced through his calculated decision to sever ties with al-Qa'ida following the publicized dispute with Zawahiri in 2013. The audio and video statements exchanged between Baghdadi, Zawahiri, and Golani²⁷ in the press show marked emotional restraint on the part of Baghdadi as he addressed conflict with AQC over Syrian operations; while Zawahiri and Golani both expressed anger over the dispute, Baghdadi clearly connected his decisions to the ideological goals of ISIL, maintaining the appearance of purity in his messages. He has also strategically approached recruitment operations, pulling leadership from former Baathist leaders who were prominent under Saddam Hussein's regime (see section on Human Capital). Baghdadi's approach to leadership²⁸ has been effective thus far by using rational action to attract senior leadership, and bold action to attract local and foreign fighters. Thus, while Masri was effective at re-establishing and re-branding ISIL following Zarqawi's death, Baghdadi is the driving force behind ISIL's strategic and operational success over the past two years.

²⁶ McCoy, T. (2014). <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/11/how-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-became-the-worlds-most-powerful-jihadi-leader/>

²⁷ Golani is the leader of al-Nusra Front, and a former second-tier leader within AQI/ISIL.

²⁸ References to Baghdadi as a pragmatic leader refers to his top management team as well.

Figure 6. ISIL Number of Attacks over Time²⁹

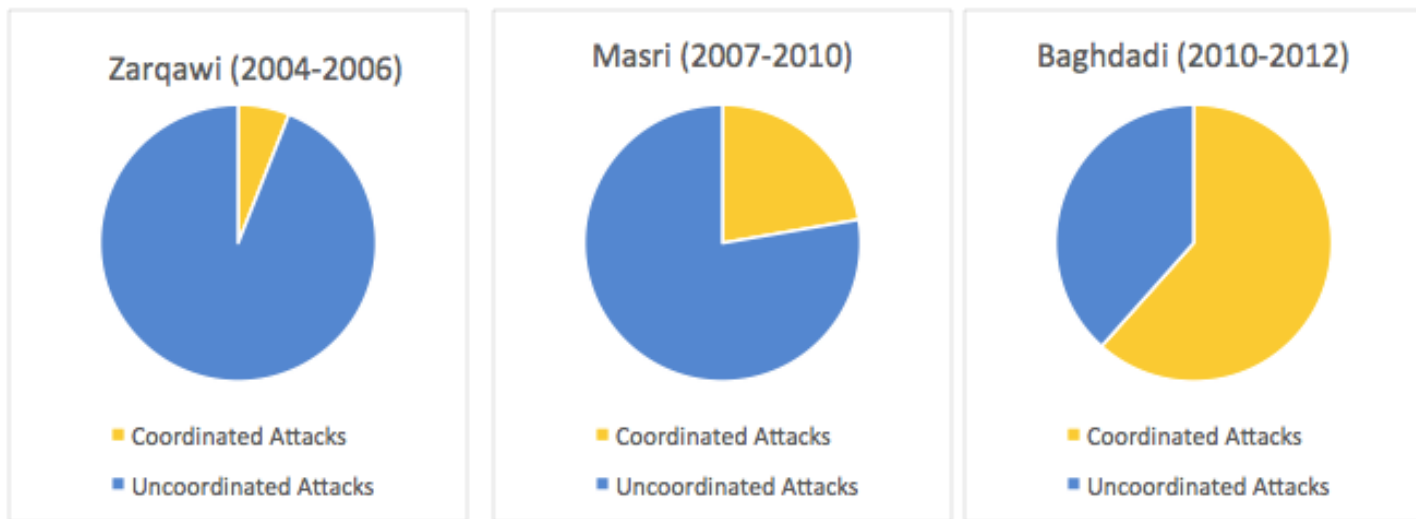
In the graph depicted in Figure 6, the reduction in performance following Zarqawi's death is evident around 2006. The graph also suggests that the performance of ISIL rose under Masri's leadership, but suffered again when he was captured in 2010. Finally, the performance of ISIL continues to rise under the regime of Baghdadi. Although the graph uses GTD data, which is only currently available through 2013, recent START reports and other press releases have indicated that this upwards trajectory has continued under the leadership of Baghdadi throughout 2014. The charts in Figure 7 reflect the proportion of highly coordinated attacks ISIL conducted under each leader. This was assessed using the scales developed in the LEADIR project.³⁰ Highly coordinated attacks involved many operatives in order to execute, required a high level of expertise, involved multiple targets being attacked simultaneously or sequentially, and were successful. As the graph on the left suggests, attacks under Zarqawi's leadership were frequent and highly lethal, but scored low in terms of coordination. The center graph suggests that coordinated attacks became more successful under Masri's leadership. However, on the right it is evident that over half of the attacks executed during Baghdadi's leadership reflected a high degree of coordination. This suggests that while lethality has only increased slightly under Baghdadi's leadership, the sophistication of ISIL has substantially increased. This is likely a reflection of Baghdadi's top management team's strategic planning skills. In traditional organizations, research shows that pragmatic leaders tend to be more innovative and organized in their strategies, leading to more sustainable performance. Because Baghdadi is a very goal-oriented leader, he has had success in terms of the training he provides operatives. With lower level organization members, providing proximal goals can be more motivating and poses a higher chance of

²⁹ Attack data was collected using the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) from START <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

³⁰ More information on the LEADIR project is available through START.

success because they are easier to accomplish and require less expertise.³¹ Baghdadi is effective in assigning smaller, easier-to-achieve goals for many of the lower ranking operatives, which, combined, contribute to his ability to lead ISIL towards their larger goals.

Figure 7. Proportion of Highly Coordinated Attacks by ISIL under Three Leaders

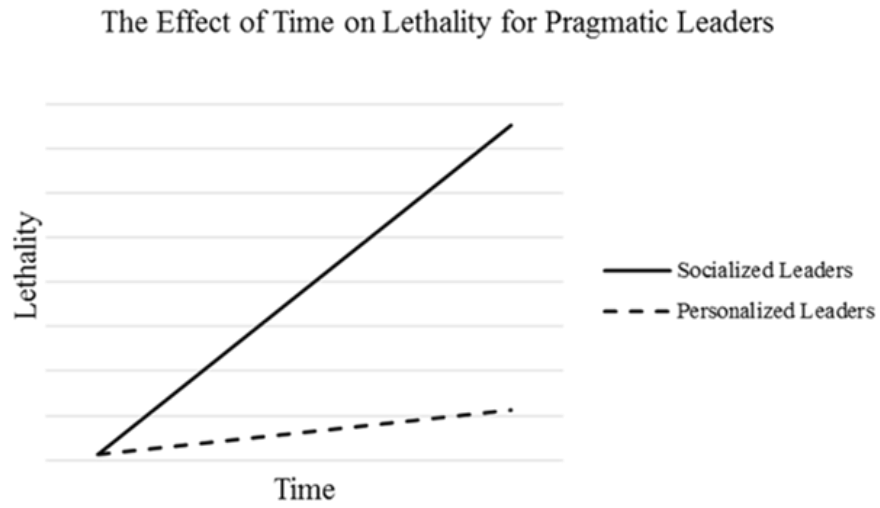


VEOs with socialized pragmatic leadership³² teams tend to increase in lethality over time, according to our work with the LEADIR project from START. When we evaluated the lethality of 60 VEOs in a longitudinal fashion, we found that the groups who had socialized pragmatic leaders tended to be more destructive over years in power when compared to groups with personalized pragmatic leaders. This may be because socialized leaders are able to inspire more followers, recruit higher performing top management teams, and learn from their mistakes—similar to leaders in more conventional organizations. In short, the notion that ISIL is now led by a socialized, power-sharing group of highly analytical leaders provides some evidence as to why their capacity to control is so remarkable as compared to other global jihad VEOs. Figure 8 indicates the general trend of lethality over time that we find in VEOs with this leadership style. Socialized leaders—though rare in VEOs—are more effective at inspiring high-level recruits in a sustainable, innovative way.

³¹ Locke, Latham, & Erez (1988). The determinants of goal commitment. *Academy of Management Review*, 13, 23-39.

³² The determination of leadership types (socialized/personalized and Charismatic/Ideological/Pragmatic) were determined by a panel of trained raters as part of the larger LEADIR project. The leadership style of the Top Management Team for ISIL was confirmed by all three raters as part of this effort.

Figure 8. Lethality over Time Increases with Leadership Style Similar to al-Baghdadi in VEOs



How al-Baghdadi has Obtained Human Capital and Experts

ISIL has acquired significant human capital in its leadership ranks and throughout the organization, in part due to Baghdadi's formative experiences in Camp Bucca, often referred to as "terrorist university" due to the ease with which prison inmates can associate and form ties with other prisoners.³³ In the

Figure 9. Unique Resource of Human Capital: The Timeline of Acquisition

2004: Baghdadi is at a training camp in Diyala, Iraq before being brought to fight U.S. forces.

Implications: Allowed Baghdadi, a trained religious scholar, to learn some basic military strategy. Also likely gave him credibility for engaging in the early AQI fighting.¹

2005 - 2009: Captured by U.S. forces and imprisoned in Camp Bucca (i.e., "Terrorist U") in Northern Iraq.¹

Implications: Held with former Baathists who were prominent leaders in Saddam Hussein's regime. Given Baghdadi's ease of dialects¹ and experience with military fighting from 2004, he was likely able to form relationships with these leaders. His participatory leadership style indicates that he was likely able to connect with them and develop empathy for their needs and likely influence mechanisms.

2012: Breaking the Walls campaign where Baghdadi is attributed with freeing operatives from Iraqi prisons.²

2013: Baghdadi launches raid on Abu Ghraib prison, freeing more operatives.

Implications: Some of these prisoners and detainees were the individuals that he met while at Camp Bucca; some were affiliates of these same individuals. These heroically-portrayed acts allowed him to gain much social capital with the elite former military commanders and their families, contributing to the magnetism of ISIL that is much more prevalent than what is found in other VEOs.

Overall implications: Having an incredibly loyal group of former elites as part of the leadership team not only translates into successful performance on the battlefield (e.g., rapid seizure of Fallujah and Ramadi in 2014), but also leads to the overall "celebrity" of ISIL leader structure. Moreover, having powerful, recognizable, and difficult-to-imitate leaders in senior ranks has added to the credibility of ISIL when compared to other VEOs who tend to have ruthless but less notable senior leadership among their top management team (e.g., personalized leaders such as Boko Haram's Shekau feel threatened by other high performing leadership team members and tend to surround themselves with weaker, sycophantic followers who will not threaten their position as the pinnacle leader.) This high performing leadership team not only is able to craft and execute impressive military strategy, it is also key to the recruitment of other high performing experts. It is likely that individuals with greater expertise (e.g., cyber capabilities) are drawn to ISIL given the appeal that working with other high performing individuals has.

¹ Time Magazine Vol. 183, Issue 2: "A Nightmare Returns", January 20, 2014

² Washington Post Profile <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/11/how-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-became-the-worlds-most-powerful-jihadi-leader/>

following section, we detail the organizational structure used to manage the unique skill sets of the recruits (e.g., there is a specific media-relations branch, a finance branch). In addition, the sections on cyber expertise and branding highlight the capacity for development of these resources and capabilities via expertise in western social media platforms (e.g., video gaming releases) and marketing savvy (e.g., swell in support for AQAP following their media campaign of western forces denigrating Muslims

³³ New York Times (2014) http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/02/opinion/how-america-helped-isis.html?_r=0

worldwide). Figure 9 illustrates how al-Baghdadi was able to build the human capital of his organization and foster a unique sense of loyalty and commitment from his top management team, as well as implications for recruiting other types of human capital.

Implications

The case example of ISIL offers several additional findings. First, while removing the leader of a VEO (leadership decapitation) may deter performance and survival in some organizations (e.g., Shining Path), other organizations survive or even increase in performance. For instance, following the death of former Boko Haram leader Mohammed Yusuf, the second-in-command Abubakar Shekau assumed leadership of the organization and their activity increased substantially, becoming the third most lethal VEO in 2013, according to START reports.³⁴ In ISIL, the leadership changes show how an organization may evolve under different leaders, and ultimately, in their case, become more sophisticated. The pragmatic top-management team under Baghdadi—a rare example of a socialized VEO leader—has illustrated incredible strategic planning skills, serving to attract highly qualified operatives to act as top commanders within the organization. Rather than attracting followers using traditional influence tactics, such as emotional appeals and fostering loyalty (as charismatics and ideologues tend to), pragmatics tend to attract high-ranking followers through logical, rational action, which can be appealing in times of crisis as the one currently facing the al-Qa’ida affiliates. Conversely, lower-ranking local and foreign fighters were more likely attracted to ISIL’s bold strategic moves. For example, when examining the group Boko Haram, the leadership of Shekau is clearly different from that of Baghdadi. Shekau takes credit for the successes of Boko Haram in a highly personalized, aggrandizing way. This style can be off-putting to other high performing leaders in the organization and is likely detrimental to recruiting experts in general according to the broader organizational leadership literature. In addition, many personalized leaders have difficulty allowing lower ranking leaders and experts to share opinions and information when they feel their authority is compromised (e.g., al-Shabaab’s former leader Godane and AQIM’s leader Droukdel have caused instability within their organizations due to publicized conflicts with senior-level organizational members).

Pragmatic, participatory leaders like Baghdadi and his team tend to attract more thoughtful, intellectual followers in the long run. For example, in speeches we coded, we determined Baghdadi to be more of a socialized leader who allows for a great deal of autonomy among followers. We also found in the annual report that ISIL publishes that senior leaders in the Syria and Iraq regions can execute the mission of ISIL as they see fit rather than check in with Baghdadi for approval. This allows for a more tailored approach to military campaigns, as well as Baghdadi’s subordinate leaders having control in how their areas are governed. In addition, the leadership style that Baghdadi evidences is one that will often plan for succession and development among his leadership team, rotating assignments so that his top managers obtain diverse expertise and experience in a variety of positions. This makes for a more robust decision making structure (i.e., the media wing leader would have had some experience in finance and thus know what kinds of messaging is more influential across certain types of donors), as well as a pool of potential

³⁴ START reports (2014) http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/STARTBackgroundReport_BokoHaramRecentAttacks_May2014_0.pdf

successors in the event of a leader decapitation event. Most VEO leaders do not think this strategically about the health of the organization, instead focusing on ways to control and monopolize power among other top leaders (and potential rivals). As noted in the section on organizational structure, ISIL is unique in that the top management team has a great deal of autonomy in decision making. We also have identified some evidence that they may engage in succession planning and cross-training among all levels of leadership.

Thus, we see the overall leadership structure and style of ISIL as a key resource that provides sustainable performance above and beyond what other VEOs in the global jihad industry have been able to execute.

Organizational Structure and Design

The Islamic State was determined by our analysis to be extremely high in terms of (1) hierarchical structure, (2) chain of command (top-down decision making), (3) division of labor (function and process-based), (4) formalization (levels of leadership are defined and have specific responsibilities), (5) centralization (planning can be localized to the central leadership and command team), and (6) communication (among levels within divisions).³⁵ Differences across VEOs in their organizational structure and design have implications for the expertise, capabilities, and resources of that organization,³⁶ which in turn contributes to their status within the global jihadist industry. This combination of characteristics is considered to be rare among competing organizations at the level of structure and design seen in the ISIL. Table 2 explains specifics of these characteristics, and following the table we provide more detail regarding ISIL according to these facets. We have grouped the characteristics into two primary attributes: structure and design. Structure, or the total number of ways in which work and people can be divided and organized to accomplish organizational goals, typically differ on degree of hierarchy, chain of command, and reason for labor division. Design refers to differences in formalization, centralization, and communication. While organizations within the same industry as ISIL may have some overlap in terms of the broader structure and design attributes of their organization, there are several key differences that contribute to ISIL's status within the global jihadist industry.

³⁵ Main sources are CNN (<http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/18/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq-hierarchy/>), the Combatting Terrorism Center (<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Flow-Chart-of-the-Organization-Structure-of-an-ISIL-Administrative-Translation.pdf>), and Tracking Terrorism & Analysis Consortium (http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/islamic-state-iraq-islamic-state-iraq-and-sham-isis?ip_login_no_cache=0babcc6d2638c3243f248d2b3295ff56)

³⁶ For instance, the Irish Republican Army is an example of an organization comparable high in many of these factors, and has shown longevity in terms of organizational sustainability and survival over time. SOURCE: Horgan, J., & Taylor, M. (2007). *The Provisional Irish Republican Army Command and Function Structure*. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 9, 1-32.

Table 2. Organizational Structure and Design

	Attributes	Description
Structure	Hierarchy	Span or control and degree of “vertical” versus “flat” structure
	Chain of Command	Decision-making occurs in a top-down versus shared manner among levels of membership
	Labor Division	Labor is divided according to some characteristics, such as function, location, or process
Design	Formalization	Status differences between organizational members and the power or influence they hold within the organization
	Centralization	Decision-making and other organizational planning is either centralized to one location or group, or is more dispersed among the organization
	Communication	Communication and information sharing occurs within divisions or groups; may also occur in a top-down manner or a shared manner among members

The Islamic State is what we would call a “tall” organization in terms of **hierarchy**,³⁷ with Baghdadi appointing specific leaders to manage the Iraq and Syria operations,³⁸ respectively, as well as a seven-person cabinet reporting directly to Baghdadi regarding policy recommendations using information from the specific operations they are responsible for.³⁹ In addition to this advisory cabinet, Baghdadi has appointed 24 governors (12 each for regions in Iraq and Syria) who manage specific regions under the control of ISIL. Each governor then has eight councils (see Figure 11) that are responsible for specific operations: financing (namely oil sales), leadership (laws and policies for the region), military and defense, legal (external policing), operatives/fighter support, security (internal policing), intelligence, and media relations (including social media). Each of these councils reporting to a specific governor has a designated leader responsible for the day-to-day operational decisions of that division. In essence, their structure is similar to that of a military or government, with multiple cabinets, councils, and subdivisions

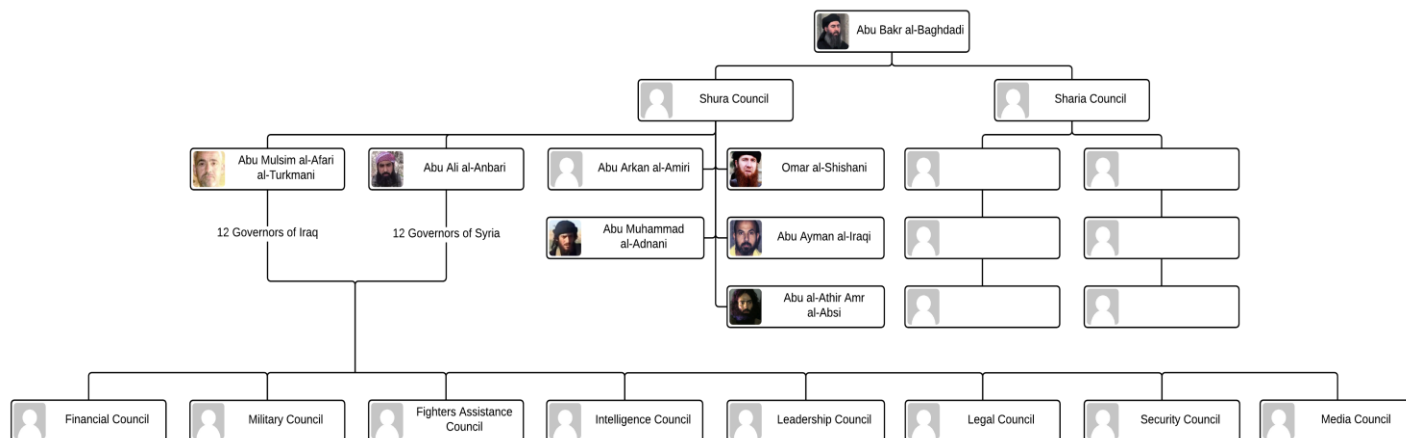
³⁷ *Hierarchy* refers to the number of levels in the organization, where taller organizations have more individuals and layers between foot soldiers and decision makers

³⁸ Abu Muslim al-Tukmani (Iraq deputy) and Abu Ali al-Anbari (Syria deputy) <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2761071/The-ISIL-family-tree-Sinister-organised-network-begins-caliph-continues-rigid-chain-command-level-foot-soldiers.html>

³⁹ TRAC Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium <http://www.trackingterrorism.org/chatter/leadership-structure-islamic-state>

separated according to specific tasks and regions that are critical to the success of the overall organization (Figure 10).

Figure 4. Organizational Structure of the Islamic State



Although many believe that hierarchical structures, while stronger, are more susceptible to adverse effects of leadership decapitation, hierarchical organizations can—under the right leadership—be more sustainable overtime⁴⁰ if the core leadership engages in information sharing and training. ISIL’s lower tiers of leadership undergo extensive training in order to allow them the autonomy to execute day-to-day activities without the constant approval of the senior leaders⁴¹. This allows ISIL to conduct diverse operations simultaneously in order to execute the overall mission of the organization. In addition, hierarchical and formalized organizations such as the ISIL are more likely to have a leadership succession plan in place to plan for the potential loss of a core leader. If a leader were to be killed or captured, the organization is set up to replace that leader from among their lower-ranks, a practice that contributes to their performance and sustainability over time. As was evidenced with organizations such as AQIM and al-Shabaab, organizational performance can suffer following the loss of leadership when information sharing and succession planning is not a focus for the top leadership. ISIL also shows high **chain of command**⁴² within these sub divisions, in which communication and responsibilities flow clearly in a top-down manner from Baghdadi to the Shura Council, and then to lower-level leadership and operatives.⁴³ The Shura Council is responsible for initiating chain-of-command and conveying directives from Baghdadi to the respective subdivisions, and to ensure that communication between the Shura Council and the other councils emphasizes collaboration. For instance, the councils who draft and

⁴⁰ E.g., ETA was most lethal during periods when it was organized in a hierarchical fashion rather than time periods when it manifested a flatter, cell-based structure. SOURCE: <https://thebluereview.org/rise-fall-eta/>, U.S. Department of the Airforce Guide to Terrorism <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army/guidterr/ch03.pdf>

⁴¹ <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>

⁴² *Chain of command* describes the reporting relationships between leaders and followers in an organization.

⁴³ “ISIL family tree: Sinister and organized network that begins with ‘the caliph’ and continues with a rigid chain of command down to foot soldiers” <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2761071/The-ISIL-family-tree-Sinister-organised-network-begins-caliph-continues-rigid-chain-command-level-foot-soldiers.html>

implement laws must adhere to the religious guidelines of the Sharia Council, which is led directly by Baghdadi.⁴⁴ **Communication** within ISIL is built upon a shared or collaborative model. While chain-of-command is top-down, communication may happen more collaboratively among levels of leadership and between the councils. **Formalization** in terms of rank, responsibilities, and authority is high, where the organization's goals are declared by top leadership (Baghdadi, the two deputy commanders, and the council leaders), but the execution is determined by the lower commanders.⁴⁵ In addition, formalization is evident in the lack of ambiguity among the ranks. While implementation may be decentralized to the lower cells, the levels of leadership and authority are clearly defined within ISIL. The responsibilities of each council are also formally outlined.⁴⁶ When missions require an overlap of expertise from two different councils, the senior leadership council delegate responsibilities and ensures communication among the lower-ranks in order to execute the mission.

The Islamic State fits the profile of a hierarchical organization that is likely to sustain performance, despite loss of the pinnacle leadership. Their current structure is similar to the structure of al-Qa'ida under the leadership of Bin Laden (prior to 2001), which ultimately helped create one of the largest and most successful VEOs of all time. In terms of comparisons to other competing organizations, the structure and design of ISIL is considered rare and difficult (although not impossible) to imitate by competing organizations. Within the global jihad affiliates of al-Qa'ida, a truly hierarchical structure with division of labor, chain of command, and a tall organizational structure are somewhat uncommon. It is more similar to a state-level organizational structure than a non-state one. As depicted in table 7 at the end of the report, AQAP is known for a more hierarchical structure similar to that of al-Qa'ida Central under Bin Laden, and al-Nusra Front⁴⁷ is also higher on hierarchy, however neither of these organizations matches ISIL in terms of formalization.

Al-Shabaab, despite attempts to create a more hierarchical organizational structure, remains flatter and more cell-based. Al-Shabaab also suffers from infighting among top leadership, which has led to a decreased chain of command. In recent years, public feuds between Godane and several second-tier leaders have decreased the public's perception of the stability of al-Shabaab. Despite several high profile attacks, such as the Westgate mall attack in Nairobi and the more recent attack on the presidential palace, al-Shabaab's leader Godane (recently deceased⁴⁸) and subcommanders such as Mukhtar Robow received criticism from their own organization members for engaging in strategic moves that seemingly opposed the organization's larger ideology. Omar Hammami, an American jihadist who was formerly a subcommander for al-Shabaab responsible for, among other tasks, Western recruitment, released a video criticizing al-Shabaab's leadership, and more notably Godane, for engaging in activities that indicated

⁴⁴ <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>

⁴⁵ <http://www.businessweek.com/interactive/2014-the-business-of-isis-spreadsheets-annual-reports-and-terror/#/>

⁴⁶ ISIS annual report

⁴⁷ Mapping Militant Organizations <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493>

⁴⁸ Al Jazeera story accessed on September 7, 2014 from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/09/us-al-shabab-ahmed-abdi-godane-201495155744230161.html>

mistreatment of the larger Muslim population.⁴⁹ Hammami was later killed by supporters of Godane, leading to further public discussion over the breakdown in al-Shabaab's leadership. In addition to al-Shabaab's deficits in chain of command, their division of labor is based on clan affiliations, location, and small ideological differences, rather than specific tasks contributing to the organizational flow of the larger group.

AQIM has suffered similar problems to al-Shabaab in terms of infighting and decentralization, resulting in different sub-units (katiba) operating autonomously, forming new alliances, utilizing different tactics for different strategic goals, and demonstrating differing degrees of ideological discipline. Given al-Qa'ida Central's shift towards a decentralized structure over the past several years, we assess the organizational structure of the ISIL as unique combinations of resources that contribute to their overall capabilities as an organization.

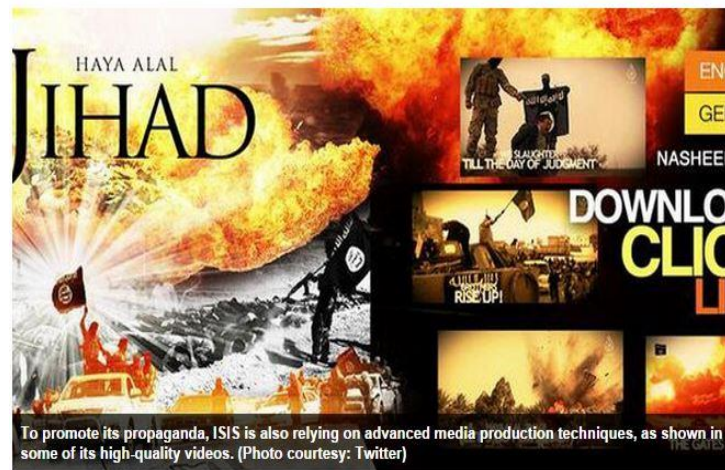
Capabilities

Capabilities represent the skills or processes organizations implement to manage resources and deliver products or services. While resources represent what an organization controls, capabilities capture what an organization does with what it controls. Capabilities are often embedded in the organization as a routine or a process, and represent a bundling of various types of resources. For example, the Coca-Cola Company has combined financial resources, human resources, and organizational resources to develop a capability in advertising. Famously, Toyota Motor Corporation combined resources to develop a capability in manufacturing. Data indicate ISIL has developed several capabilities.

State-of-the-Art Cyber Capabilities

The cyber sophistication and media relations of ISIL were identified as an organizational resource

⁴⁹ Hansen, S. J. (2014). "An in-depth look at Al-Shabaab's internal divisions," *CTC Sentinel*, vol 7, issue 2

Figure 5. Screenshot of Production-Quality Videos

resulting in stronger capabilities in terms of internal planning (i.e., cyber-facilitated logistics) and brand dissemination, one which sets them apart from other global jihadist organizations in their industry. All movements depend on external sources of media to develop and communicate frames that project who the movement is and what the movement stands for. Very rarely can a movement do this without any assistance from the mass media. From a framing perspective, media attention provides movements with “free” publicity and movements that receive little media attention are at a substantial disadvantage. Even negative publicity is far better than neglect.

From a media relation perspective, ISIL has adopted several “best practices” from other industries such as Photoshopped, glossy magazines (*Dabiq* is similar to *Inspire* in production value); the use of traditional social media like Twitter, YouTube, and Vine; and the adoption of new, pioneering peer-to-peer technology. However, while *Inspire* focuses more strongly on training, *Dabiq* is notable because the emphasis is on maintaining a strong media brand and disseminating highly ideologically-congruent propaganda to promote radicalism among distant operatives, sympathizers, and foreign fighters,⁵⁰ a tactic which reinforces the overall differences between ISIL and other AQ affiliates (see section on Organizational Branding for more detail). In terms of other best practices for using cyber and media sophistication to their advantage, take, for example, the video game campaign launched by ISIL earlier this fall. Video games have a specific age demographic that is targeted⁵¹ allowing dissemination to the largest possible audience. Table 3, below, outlines the 10 most popular games in 2012:

⁵⁰ Article in New Republic (2014) <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119203/isiss-dabiq-vs-al-qaedas-inspire-comparing-two-extremist-magazines>

⁵¹ <http://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/634491-grand-theft-auto-v/67437494>

Table 3. Game Popularity

Game rank	Game/Series (ESRB Rating)	No. boys listing 1 or more in that series (%)	ESRB content descriptors
1	Grand Theft Auto (M)	242 (44%)	Blood and gore, Intense violence, Strong language, Strong sexual content, Use of drugs
2	Madden (E)	189 (34%)	No descriptors
3	Halo (M)	154 (28%)	Blood and gore, Violence
4	NBA (E)	111 (20%)	No descriptors
5	Tony Hawk (T)	90 (16%)	Blood, Crude humor, Language, Suggestive themes, Use of alcohol, Violence
6	NCAA (E)	85 (16%)	No descriptors
7	Need for Speed (T)	76 (14%)	Mild language, Suggestive
8	ESPN (E)	56 (10%)	No descriptors
9	Medal of Honor (T)	40 (7%)	Violence
10	Lord of the Rings (T)	28 (5%)	Violence

Creating modifications to popular video games demonstrates a high level of sophistication.⁵² This high degree of media sophistication has been adopted by ISIL as it enhances traditional recruitment tactics with those employed by more technologically savvy groups. For example, in Figure 12 it is clear that they have taken the above-mentioned best-selling game and created Mods (modifications) that enable players to engage in combat as members of ISIL.

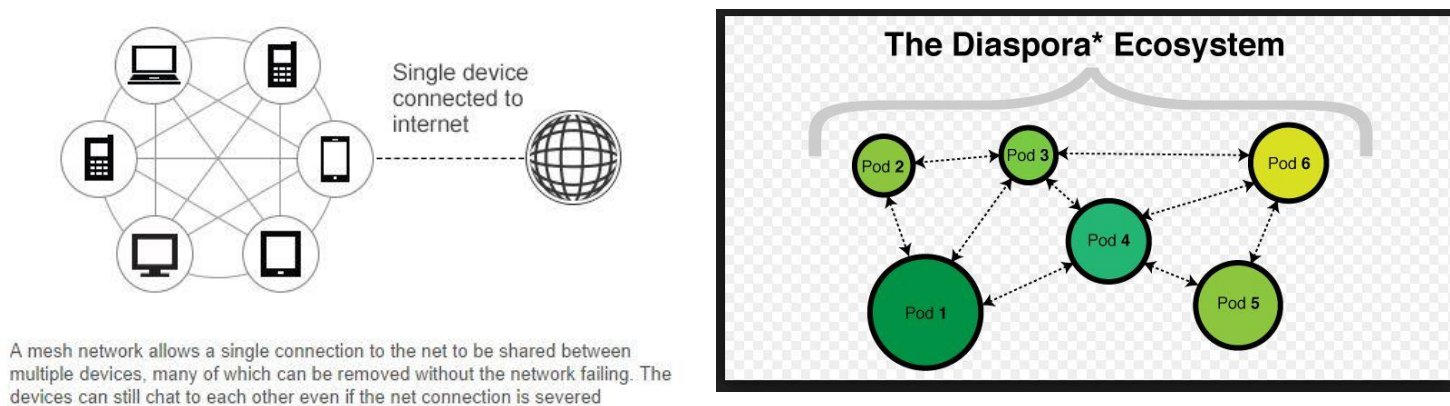
Figure 12. Modified First-Person-Shooter Videogame



⁵² Stalker, P. J. (2006). *Gaming in art: A case study of two examples of the artistic appropriation of computer games and the mapping of historical trajectories of "Art Games" versus mainstream computer games* (Doctoral dissertation).

In an effort to maintain the electronic presence that ISIL is often extolled for, it has engaged in early adoption of specific peer-to-peer technologies. Applications such as Firechat⁵³ and Diaspora,⁵⁴ as referenced in Figure 13, are examples of bluetooth networks used by ISIL that are capable of transmitting and receiving even when no Internet connection is available.

Figure 13. Decentralized Peer-To-Peer Networks

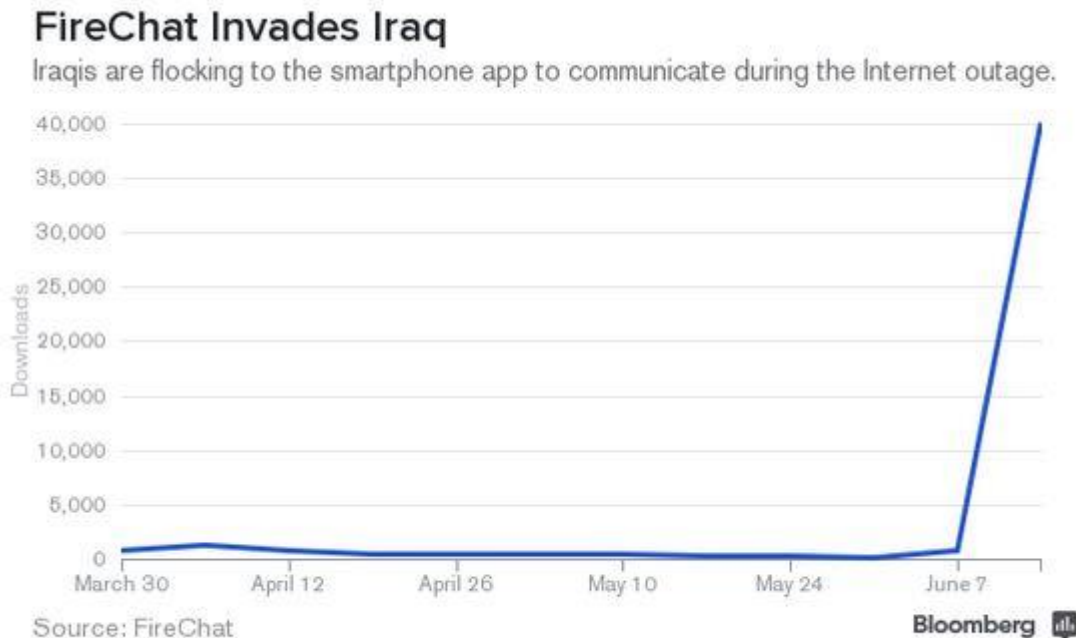


Another peer-to-peer anonymous network—ask.fm—has been utilized to allow for a one-to-one interaction and recruitment techniques enabling the dissemination of information about how to join the jihadist group as referenced in Figure 14 .

⁵³ Open Garden’s Firechat was one of the first — if not the first — application to make use of Apple’s new multi-peer mesh networking capabilities enabling its users to anonymously chat with each other, even when there was no Internet connection available

⁵⁴ With Diaspora, instead of everyone’s data being contained on huge central servers owned by a large organization, local servers (“pods”) can be set up anywhere in the world and individuals choose which pod to register with - perhaps a local pod - and seamlessly connect with the diaspora community worldwide

Figure 14. Spiked Increase of Anonymous Peer-To-Peer Application



These types of decentralized communication techniques are both prevalent and easily accessible to ISIL (see Figure 15), and are a key resource for this group when reaching out to members (e.g., the FireChat app allows for covert planning of coordinated attacks) and potential recruits in the broader umma (e.g., the Diaspora.com network allows them to reach a variety of new members, while the Grand Theft Auto modification is clearly targeted to a new demographic of individuals. Ask.fm is used to disseminate information to potential recruits; links are available in ISIL user Instagram and Twitter accounts).

Figure 15. Usage Anonymous Q&A Session Offering Recruitment Information



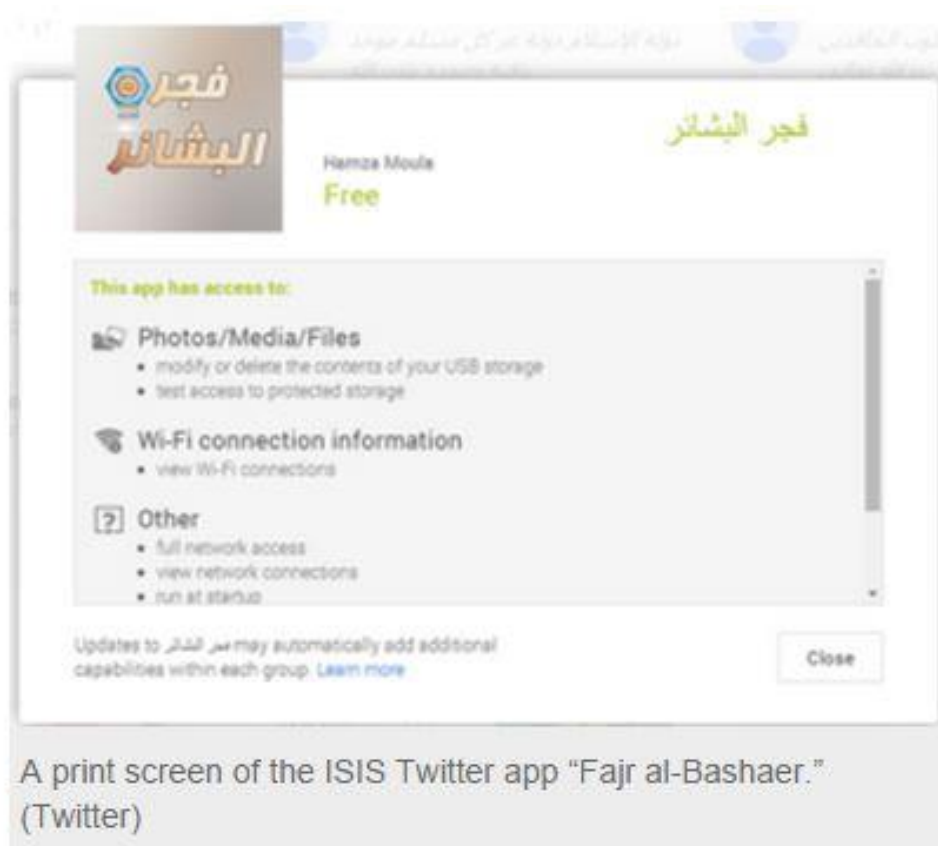
In addition, the cyber sophistication of ISIL allows them to capitalize on more centralized, popular social media websites such as Twitter, despite efforts to shut down their accounts. Each time an account is closed another one opens within minutes (see Figure 16).

Figure 16. Twitter Account Recreation/Reactivation



This is partly due to the app that ISIL mandates its members download. This app, available on Google Play (see Figure 17), allows for more access to personal data than nearly any social networking app on the market. For example, when downloading this application the user agrees to allow access to all of their social media accounts to the administrator of this application: ISIL. By doing this, ISIL can circumvent attempts by the network controllers in shutting down their accounts by sending propaganda through any individual's personal account.

Figure 17. Google Play Application



This degree of cyber sophistication, coupled with ISIL's understanding of marketing and media relations, enables a much more robust and fluid recruitment arm of the organization and highlights the kind of personal information they can access. This also demonstrates how ISIL has more robust Twitter accessibility and social network site presence than other VEO groups that are currently not employing these technologies. When assessing the cyber sophistication required to execute the diverse array of strategies as detailed in this section, our research has shown that ISIL is a highly sophisticated group—and the level of expertise required to copy this level of sophistication would take years to develop and/or a targeted recruitment of members with cyber technology expertise.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ As described in technical report for USSTRATCOM J58, *Technical Report for Task Order 31, The Convergence of Cyber and CWMD in Non-State Actors*. Ligon, Harms, Derrick, Simi, Beard, Mahoney, Schaeffer, & Sadowski, 2014.

Organizational Branding

One facet of ISIL that we identified as being unique relative to many competing global jihadist organizations affiliated with al-Qa'ida Central is their efforts to establish a unique organizational brand that is separate and unique from the AQ franchise. Al-Qa'ida Central is known for being the core of a major hub of global jihadist organizations, in part due to their reputation and legitimacy following the 9/11 attacks, as well as the public perception of their former leader Bin Laden.⁵⁶ As discussed in previous sections, the affiliate status is one that is rare and difficult to achieve. Both the affiliate and al-Qa'ida's senior leadership (AQL) must endorse the partnership.⁵⁷ This suggests that the perceived benefits of the affiliate relationship must exist on both sides. Although the affiliation reflects a two-way relationship, it is interesting to consider that historically, gaining this status seems to be accompanied by the affiliate organization deferring to AQC as the dominant organization. For instance, AQIM, AQAP, and AQI all assumed formal name changes, adopting the "al-Qa'ida" moniker as part of their organization's identity⁵⁸ upon solidifying their affiliate status. This strategy, started under the leadership of Bin Laden, projects the al-Qa'ida network as a single brand, which makes their global presence appear larger and more cohesive than it would if they maintained individual identities. This tactic also undermines some of the publicized tension among leadership of the affiliated organizations.

The more recent affiliates do not appear to have been required to promote this unified brand, as organizations such as al-Shabaab maintained their previous name. This may be an indicator of a decrease in brand loyalty following the death of Bin Laden, who is credited as a driving force behind the global jihadist and al-Qa'ida network,⁵⁹ or a decrease in brand value after AQI's tactics and targets provoked a backlash from Sunni tribes. Despite the decrease in AQC's attack activity over the past several years, al-Qa'ida Central remains the major hub of the global jihadist organizations,⁶⁰ with most news stories covering attacks by affiliated organizations referring to them in reference to their relationship to al-Qa'ida Central (e.g., "an attack executed by an al-Qa'ida-affiliated organization..."). The Islamic State (formerly al-Qa'ida in Iraq) is the only notable organization to officially change their name to an al-Qa'ida moniker,⁶¹ and then later change their name again to separate their identity. Despite some debate over

⁵⁶ TRAC Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/al-qaeda-central-command-aqc?ip_login_no_cache=f092a0403a228826cfbe2b6d265e7127

⁵⁷ Byman, D. (2012). Breaking the Bonds between Al-Qa'ida and its Affiliate Organizations. *The Brookings Institution*.

⁵⁸ This tendency has decreased under Zawahiri's leadership, as organizations such as al-Shabaab and al-Nusra Front have not changed their names in any official way. However, the RT believes that this may be a symptom of the decrease in loyalty following UBL's death; Zawahiri does not inspire the same degree of adoration as his predecessor.

⁵⁹ Farrall, L. (2011). Will Al-Qa'ida and Al-Shabab Formally merge? *CTC Sentinel* <http://www.ctc.edu/posts/will-al-Qaeda-and-al-Shabaab-formally-merge>

⁶⁰ Braniff, W. (2014). The State of Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates, and Associated Groups: View from Outside Experts, the START Consortium http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/STARTCongressionalTestimony_StateofAQandAffiliates_WilliamBraniff.pdf

⁶¹ There is some controversy regarding this subject, since it could be argued that AQI/ISIL caused backlash against AQC. This would suggest that given AQI's previous "misbehaviors" under the al-Qa'ida franchise (e.g., beheading of Muslims), they may have been willing to rebrand themselves because they tarnished the AQ moniker. Essentially, AQI/ISIL from the period that Zarqawi was the leader, were never obedient subordinates like the other affiliates, and so the separation between ISIL and AQC may have been in the
ISIL: Branding, Leadership Culture and Lethal Attraction

the origins of this decision, the strategic move reflects some understanding on the part of ISIL leadership that there are potential disadvantages associated with maintaining their relationship with AQC (e.g., deferring to Zawahiri’s decisions regarding the AQ franchise as opposed to those that best serve the mission of ISIL). Having an independent brand can increase firm legitimacy and allow ISIL to maintain credit for their innovative and strategic moves over the past year. Consequently, one characteristic that makes ISIL rare, relative to other affiliates, is their analytical assessment of the benefits and costs of their establishment of an independent brand versus maintaining their affiliate status.

In order to further show how well-established the ISIL brand has become, we drew from Byman’s work explaining the mutual benefits al-Qa’ida Central and their affiliates receive from the alliance.⁶² Essentially, these refer to the services that al-Qa’ida can provide to an affiliate, and the value that the affiliate provides to al-Qa’ida . As al-Qaeda Central officially severed their alliance with ISIL, ISIL established themselves as a competing brand. We were interested in examining whether (1) AQC still can provide the same services to affiliates as under UBL’s leadership, (2) ISIL could currently provide these same services to potential affiliates, and (3) the benefits AQC receives from affiliates are benefits needed by ISIL. Tables 4 and 5 outline our analysis.

Table 4. Capabilities and Services Offered to Affiliates by AQC/ISIL

Services Offered in Exchange for Aligning	Currently Offered by Al-Qa’ida Central	Currently Offered by the Islamic State ⁶³
Opportunities to remedy failures	HIGH	MODERATE
Financial support	MODERATE	HIGH
Safety and territory (haven)	MODERATE	HIGH
Training and recruitment	HIGH	HIGH
Defensive support	MODERATE	HIGH
Branding and media publicity	HIGH	HIGH
Networking with other VEOs	HIGH	LOW

works for longer than Baghdadi has led the organization. That being said, Baghdadi and his senior leadership can be credited for the official dissent from Zawahiri over the past two years.

⁶² Byman, D. (2014) Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with its Affiliate Organizations. *Security Studies*, 23, 431-470.

⁶³ Some of these may change as coalition involvement increases. For instance, air strikes targeting their oil reserves may reduce their ability to provide funding, at least for some period of time. In addition, while they have territory currently, the Iraq and Syria region is currently much more volatile in terms of safety than some other regions, so their ability to provide safety could increase or decrease as events unfold.

Table 5. Resources Needed for AQC/ISIL from Alliances

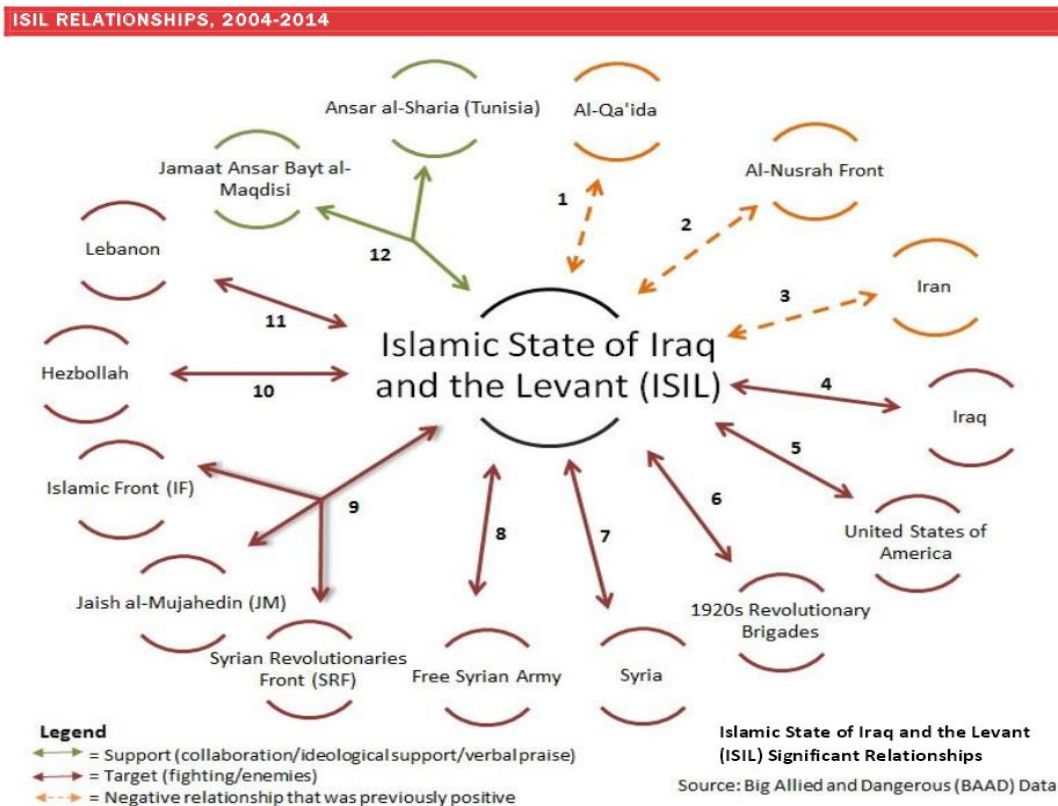
Benefits to the Supporting Organization	Needed by Al-Qa’ida Central	Needed by the Islamic State
Mission fulfillment and reach	HIGH	MODERATE
Relevance in a growing network	HIGH	MODERATE
Logistical support (operations)	HIGH	LOW
Skilled operatives/human capital	HIGH	LOW

As the analyses presented in Tables 4 and 5 suggest, ISIL and AQC are fairly evenly matched in terms of the services they can provide to potential affiliates, with AQC being higher in some areas (e.g., networking with other organizations), and ISIL being higher in other areas (e.g., safety and territory). However, when examining the needs of AQC met by the affiliates compared with the needs of ISIL met by potential affiliates, it is apparent that ISIL is much better positioned strategically to exist as an independent organization. While acquiring affiliates may grow the brand of ISIL, they are not in a position where the benefits of an alliance outweigh potential strains on their organization’s mission and resources. Essentially, this shows an understanding on the part of ISIL leadership that creating a self-sustaining organization (albeit one with some vulnerabilities) has the potential for longevity.⁶⁴ Furthermore, a recent START report analyzing the history of ISIL’s relationships with other organizations and groups over time suggests that their strong organizational branding and efforts to establish themselves as self-reliant have been a focus for much longer than was previously realized (Figure 18)⁶⁵. Consequently, the overall brand ISIL has created is one characteristic that separates them within their industry.

⁶⁴ The caveat being that the presence of the Assad regime has contributed to the success of ISIL thus far because they are partially operating in a region that is in a social upheaval and is in the absence of a functioning government. If Iraq and Syria were to invite intervention, this calculus would likely change. In attempting to govern themselves as a self-sustaining organization, ISIL allows some vulnerabilities should the conflict surrounding them decrease substantially.

⁶⁵ Strategic alliances do not always result in value creation, particularly for joint ventures without strong governance agreements (Hoffman & Schlosser, 2001)

Figure 18. Relationships Between ISIL and Other Organizations, 2004-2014



The branding and firm notoriety efforts made by ISIL are evidenced in several ways. First, while many affiliates such as al-Nusra Front rely on AQC for financing, or have only short-term self-financing plans in place (e.g., Boko Haram and AQIM fundraise through ransom demands from hostages or robberies), ISIL has established long-term financing (e.g., through their control over oil resources) that has a high return over time and is much more stable and self-sustaining (as long as they are able to maintain control over this resource⁶⁶). Second, ISIL has engaged in highly diverse propaganda and recruitment strategies in order to attract desirable followers that meet specific criteria. For instance, ISIL used their Breaking the Walls campaign to gain loyalty from experienced militants who previously served under high-ranking leaders (see the section on Leadership and Human Capital for more detail). In addition, ISIL has used a diverse array of flashy media campaigns (e.g., the GTA trailer and the videos of Western journalists) to attract more foreign fighters and operatives with specific expertise (see the section on Cyber Capabilities for more detail). Third, ISIL has made strong efforts to control critical infrastructure, rather than to destroy it (compared to organizations such as Boko Haram who bomb telecommunications and power facilities to incapacitate security forces and first responders). This allows them to provide services to the population, garnering local civilian support and the support of the local elite. Finally, ISIL has made efforts to establish themselves as a larger social movement and leaders of the Sunni Muslim population, by promoting images of the leader holding religious services and leading prayer (see image of Baghdadi

⁶⁶ If the US or another state-level adversary were to aggressively target these resources, ISIL would suffer in terms of finances garnered from oil sales. While oil is not their only fundraising resource, it is currently their most lucrative and stable resource.

in front the Mosul mosque in Iraq⁶⁷). This established the legitimacy of the organization and separates their brand from the al-Qa'ida franchise (see more information in the section on Organizational Legitimacy).

Figure 19. Baghdadi's First Public Appearance in Mosul Mosque



Organizational Legitimacy

Firm legitimacy is a construct used in the more conventional organizational literature to describe the intangible reputation that firms obtain by combining resources such as leadership, structure, marketing, and performance. In other words, brand communities (i.e., sympathizers) form stronger ties to an organization as it increases in legitimacy, or begins to look like a reputable, high-performing organization. What is interesting about ISIL is that this organization spends a great deal of time and resources on communicating aspects of its legitimacy both to (1) its local populace and (2) the broader umma.

⁶⁷ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's first Public Appearance in Mosul Mosque, the head of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), - See more at: <http://destination-yisrael.biblesearchers.com/destination-yisrael/2014/08/islamic-isis-caliph-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-threatens-that-israel-will-soon-be-conquered.html#sthash.enIHFMSW.dpuf>

Figure 20. Sharia Court (left) and Hisbah Policeman in Syria Interact with Customers (right)

Local Populace Legitimacy. A key difference that we see in ISIL when compared to other global jihad VEOs is its rapidly increased capacity to govern once it has taken control of a region or province. Part of this is due to reliance on locals to help run the businesses and services but simply just “report to ISIL,” and part of this is due to the unique processes and services that ISIL offers to locals. For example, in Raqqa, the Hisbah (or the morality police) patrol the streets for infractions of sharia (Islamic law) but also violations of basic principles of fairness to the people. In a Vice News Documentary, the Hisbah policeman (see Figure 19 for a screen shot) is seen arguing with street vendors about unfair pricing of sheep versus beef to customers. In addition, the Hisbah enforce punishment for infractions regarding drug use, alcohol possession, and stealing. While the punishment may be perceived as harsh to westerners, it also provides for a great deal of security and stability. As evidenced by the compliance with sharia standards in the provinces ISIL controls, the Hisbah have gained a great deal of legitimacy among local civilians (much like similar morality police in Saudi Arabia).

In addition to the Hisbah, the sharia courts and arbitration process as administered by ISIL provide a tangible service to the population—particularly Sunni who were not treated fairly under the Maliki or Assad Regimes. This court, accessible to all citizens (even non-Muslims), allows for individuals to engage in arbitration by specialized judges who hear complaints in the “People’s Affairs Court.” This provides some access to adjudication processes that were not available before, furthering the notion of legitimacy by an ISIL governing body, particularly in a region where the current government is perceived as dysfunctional.

Finally, it appears that ISIL is providing basic services such as access to food, water, charity distribution, and education. While the education is based on Islamic studies rather than traditional academics, access to a regimented process for participation in the group via the nursery program, Sharia Camp⁶⁸ (ages 7-15), and eventually the military camp (ages 16+) does grant some legitimacy to ISIL. This is particularly

⁶⁸ <https://shariaunveiled.wordpress.com/tag/islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-isis/>

the case in Syria where there are multiple Sunni-led movements with similar ideologies but without the infrastructure needed to transition to a government.

Broader Umma Legitimacy. Within the field of social movements one of the most important distinctions involves differentiating broader social movements from social movement organizations (SMOs). While SMOs play a central role in the formation of most social movements, SMOs are not synonymous with them. Social movements are more amorphous than SMOs which are typically demarcated by a clearly defined leadership, command structure, and, in some cases, formal membership. Movements, alternatively, do not have members but rather participants. Similarly, movement leadership is much more informal than SMO leadership.

Figure 21. Islamic State Training Camps



From a social movement perspective, ISIL is a social movement organization (SMO) and operates within a larger Salafist movement composed of various violent and nonviolent Muslim groups with overlapping but distinct grievances involving local and international issues. The most recent iteration of ISIL is but one phase of development and reflects a longer period of organizational development. By itself, the ISIL organization does not fully constitute

a social movement but as the idea of ISIL becomes more diffuse across the region and more broadly disseminated (first, as a result of ISIL's internal media campaign but probably even more a result of the mass media publicity focused on the recent beheadings, and second, as veterans of ISIL and peer communication become more dispersed), the SMO is beginning to look more like an entire movement.⁶⁹ One of the most important aspects of a movement is its ability to inspire like-minded but otherwise unconnected individuals to join "the cause." This type of emulation is an important source of spreading a movement's idea(s) and results in multiple types of organizational and ideological mutation. For the original SMO, like ISIL, the diffusion process is paradoxical. On the one hand, as the idea(s) spreads the originator SMO will likely be held in greater esteem and its organizational status will grow. But as was the case with the growth of the al-Qa'ida idea, once this process begins to unfold the originator SMO loses

⁶⁹ While media coverage likely disseminates the idea of ISIL to non-believers, current and former operatives and sympathizers will also play a role in the global spread of ISIL as a movement.

large degrees of control over what emulators do with the idea(s). In fact, in many ways this type of process unleashes a type of open market.

Like many other social movements, establishing and increasing territorial control is a key issue for ISIL. While other VEOs have controlled territory, what is significant about ISIL is the strategic international importance of the territory it controls. For example, AQAP controls territory, but it does not have the same degree of vital natural resources or critical infrastructure, as the regions in Iraq and Syria now controlled by ISIL.⁷⁰

In addition, ISIL is at a heightened level of development as the organization is centrally involved in two civil wars. Movements begin with sporadic acts of mobilization and over time the mobilization may or may not evolve into full-fledged revolution. In the case of the ISIL this is clearly occurring in Iraq and Syria. ISIL is on the verge of completing what Charles Tilly described as the continuum of “mobilization to revolution.”⁷¹ This assessment also contributes to the firm legitimacy that the ISIL has with the broader umma community, as it becomes known as “THE” global jihad movement.

Research Objective Three: DETERMINANTS OF AN ISIL SUSTAINABLE ADVANTAGE

The identification of the resources and capabilities controlled by ISIL represents the first step in conducting VRIO analysis. However, in order to successfully assess the long-term sustainability of ISIL, each resource and capability is evaluated on four dimensions: value, rarity, imperfect imitability, and organization (VRIO). *Value* refers to the ability of the resource or capability to add value to the organization. Value is assessed in conventional organizations by the ability of the resource or capability to lower costs or increase perceived benefits. *Rarity* references the scarcity of the resource or capability. A resource or capability is said to be rare if only a few organizations in the industry control the resource or capability. *Imperfect imitability* (i.e., costly to imitate) refers to the relative difficulty in which competing organizations encounter when trying to imitate the resource or capability. Barriers to imitation limiting the ability of competitors to copy a given resource or capability include:

- (1) History – the focal resource or capability was acquired at a *particular* place and time in the past. Competing organizations are unable to acquire (imitate) that resource or capability because they are operating in a different place and time. For example, Coca-Cola Company’s international distribution and brand are a direct result of decisions made during World War 2 to place a Coke within an arm’s reach of American soldiers. Competing soft drink manufacturers are unable to replicate Coke’s distribution and brand because of the resources and capabilities that have developed over time.

⁷⁰ While AQAP does control some territory in Yemen that have implications for resources and infrastructure, these regions are not as ideologically important to mainstream Muslims as places such as Baghdad are in Iraq.

⁷¹ Tilly, C. (1978). *From Mobilization to Revolution*. McGraw-Hill.

(2) Causal ambiguity – Competing organizations are unable to imitate the focal resource or capability because of its complexity, tacit and/or intangible attributes. Casual ambiguity suggests competitors are unable to determine the exact cause of the competitive advantage. Casual ambiguity often increases as organizational capabilities leverage more resources and as the resources leveraged are more tacit or intangible in nature.

(3) Social complexity – Competing organizations are unable to replicate the focal resource or capability due to its complex social nature. Organizational culture provides one example of a resource with high levels of social complexity. For example, Google has developed a distinct employee culture of openness and innovation, built on relationships between the employees and the organization. Efforts to imitate this culture would likely be unsuccessful due to the complexity and idiosyncratic attributes of the social relationships involved.

Lastly, the *overall organization* of the organization (i.e., structure, controls and compensation policies) must be aligned in such a way as to take advantage of the resource or capability in question. If the organization fails to appropriately align its structure, controls, and compensation policies, disadvantages may emerge even though resources and capabilities are valuable, rare and difficult to imitate.

Resources and capabilities demonstrating value, rarity, imperfect imitability, and organization (i.e., VRIO) represent the central drivers of *long-term sustainability and performance*. Organizations possessing only valuable resources or capabilities are expected to perform the same as all other organizations in the industry (i.e., competitive parity). Organizations possessing valuable and rare resources or capabilities are expected to perform better than other organizations but only for a short time (i.e., temporary competitive advantage), while organizations possessing valuable, rare, and inimitable resources or capabilities are expected to demonstrate a long-term advantage (i.e., sustained competitive advantage). Subsequently, a VRIO analysis of the resources and capabilities controlled by ISIL is presented in Table 6, and indicates that leadership, cyber, and legitimacy are key differentiators.

Table 6. ISIL Internal Resources and Capabilities

Resource or Capability	Valuable	Rare	Costly to	Exploited by Organization	Competitive Implication
Leadership and Human Capital	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sustained Competitive Advantage
Organizational Structure	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Temporary Competitive Advantage
Marketing/Branding	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Temporary Competitive Advantage
Cyber Sophistication	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sustained Competitive Advantage
Organizational Legitimacy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sustained Competitive Advantage

Table 7. VRIO ISIL Analysis Chart

Organizational Structure	Marketing/Branding	Attack Sophistication	Cyber Sophistication	Leadership and Human Capital	Firm Legitimacy
ISIS	ISIS	ISIS	ISIS	ISIS	ISIS
AQAP	AQAP	AQAP	AQAP	AQAP	AQAP
AQIM	AQIM	AQIM	AQIM	AQIM	AQIM
al-Nusra Front	al-Nusra Front	al-Nusra Front	al-Nusra Front	al-Nusra Front	al-Nusra Front
al-Shabaab	al-Shabaab	al-Shabaab	al-Shabaab	al-Shabaab	al-Shabaab
Boko Haram	Boko Haram	Boko Haram	Boko Haram	Boko Haram	Boko Haram
AQC	AQC	AQC	AQC	AQC	AQC



Organization is Extremely Low/Unique/Rare on This Attribute

Organization is Extremely High/Unique/Rare on This Attribute

Summary Support for Hypothesis: ISIL is a durable movement and/or a viable caliphate in the geographical areas it currently controls

When examining rival VEOs in the global jihad industry in Table 7 above, it becomes clear that no one organization has the bundle of resources and capabilities that ISIL currently possesses. The VRIO analysis indicated that some of these resources and capabilities may be easily imitated by rival groups in the global jihad movement. For example, al-Nusra Front has effectively played on the grievances of the Sunni populace by branding themselves as a viable group that is different from AQC (i.e., one that “gets things done” differently—and more brutally—than AQC has been able to). In addition, AQAP has structured itself in a way that is efficient, legitimate, and sophisticated due to a long tenure in the region, similar to that of ISIL. Finally, AQC is still seen as the quintessential global jihad social movement, and likely will retain that position unless ISIL continues to grow with foreign fighters and the broader umma movement at a rate that out-paces AQC. One of the strengths of UBL’s speeches was his tie of local grievances to the global mission of the “far enemy.”

However, the VRIO analysis does indicate two important findings. First, there are no groups currently that rival ISIL in terms of cyber sophistication, leadership/human capital, or organizational legitimacy efforts. This has important implications because we evaluated these particular resources as being extremely costly to imitate by other VEOs. First, the cyber sophistication that ISIL possesses is stronger and was acquired via the recruitment of experts in cyber technology and also via an extreme early investment in the equipment and infrastructure needed for such experts to work. In addition, the willingness to “cut losses” and expand to additional venues and platforms in social networking is unique among organizations in general, but particularly unique among ideological organizations who tend to have difficulty making changes to keep up with their environment (organizational adaptation). The cyber technology (e.g., the app that ISIL built to allow access to users’ personal data) allows ISIL to exhibit a much more flexible, innovative approach to Internet-communication technology.

Second, as shown in Figure 10, the leadership and human capital was acquired via a complex chain of events that would be difficult for any other VEO to imitate. The unique characteristics of al-Baghdadi made him the perfect influential leader for the current context of social situations and environmental unrest (e.g., the timing of his detainment that coincided with elite former Baathists) and the subsequent roles he allows his top management team to play in terms of decision-making and recruiting are remarkable examples of causal ambiguity and social complexity that make this particular resource a sustainable competitive advantage for this VEO.

Finally, the VRIO analysis indicates that even while certain groups share some characteristics of ISIL, no one group in its global jihad industry can compete across all of the strategic resources and capabilities it possesses. For example, ISIL has strong leadership, cyber sophistication, and remarkable organizational structure that allow it to brand itself in a way that outpaces the narrative messaging provided by other VEOs. In addition, the organizational legitimacy (achieved through promoting ideological superiority to competing groups and strong organizational branding as an independently sustainable movement) it has

garnered with the local population, with elites, and with the broader umma indicates that this organization should have the capacity to become a viable caliphate in the geographic regions it now controls.

Summary and Conclusions

Using an internal strategic organizational analysis, we found support for the hypothesis that ISIL is a durable movement in the geographic region it currently controls. There are three strategic resources and capabilities that we posit will allow ISIL to become a durable movement: (1) unique leadership style and structure, (2) state-of-the-art cyber usage, and (3) organizational legitimacy in an unstable region.

The Leadership Style and Structure of ISIL differ from those we have analyzed in more than 90 VEO leadership teams. This particular characteristic is not only rare, but also would be difficult to replicate in another group given the historical conditions that gave rise to ISIL, as well as the pragmatic participatory style that Baghdadi has with his close followers. Specifically, Baghdadi's approach to leadership suggests that the senior leaders in the Syria and Iraq regions can execute the mission of ISIL as they see fit, rather than check in with Baghdadi for approval. This allows for a more tailored approach to military campaigns, as well as Baghdadi's subordinate leaders having control in how their areas are governed. In addition, the leadership style that Baghdadi evidences is one that will often plan for succession and development among his leadership team, rotating assignments so that his top managers obtain diverse expertise and experience in a variety of positions. This makes for a more robust decision-making structure (e.g., the media wing senior council would have had some experience in finance and thus know what kinds of messaging is more influential across certain types of donors), as well as a pool of potential successors in the event of a leader decapitation action. Most personalized/aggrandizing VEO leaders do not think this strategically about the health of the organization, instead focusing on ways to control and monopolize power among other top leaders (and potential rivals). As noted in the section on Organizational Structure, ISIL is unique in that the top management team has a great deal of autonomy in decision making, is highly hierarchical and formalized, and expertise among top advisers is encouraged and valued. In addition, Baghdadi's pragmatic approach to organizational leadership can be seen in his strategic moves to recruit highly desirable leaders for his top management team (e.g., former Baathists who were prominent in Saddam Hussein's regime). Accordingly, we determined the overall leadership structure and style of ISIL to be a key resource that provides sustainable performance above and beyond what other VEOs in the global jihad industry have been able to execute

The Cyber Sophistication of ISIL shows the expertise and diversity of their cyber and media team. After profiling this group's use of cyber technologies for over a year, we have determined that they use a variety of technological platforms, diverse languages, and tailored messaging. The cyber technologies facilitate internal coordination (e.g., command and control) and focuses information flow externally with the broader umma and potential foreign fighters (see section on Cyber Capabilities). This degree of cyber sophistication, coupled with ISIL's understanding of marketing, organizational branding, and media

relations (e.g., consider the GTA game campaign to recruit potential foreign fighters), enables a much more robust and fluid recruitment arm of the organization and highlights the kind of personal information they can access. This also demonstrates how ISIL has more robust Twitter accessibility (e.g., through the mobile twitter app they developed) and social network site presence than other VEO groups that are currently not employing these technologies. These types of decentralized communication techniques are both prevalent and easily accessible to ISIL, and are a key resource for this group when reaching out to members (e.g., the FireChat app allows for covert planning of coordinated attacks) and potential recruits in the broader umma. When assessing the cyber sophistication required to execute the diverse array of strategies as detailed in this section, our research has shown that ISIL is a highly sophisticated group—and the level of expertise required to copy this level of sophistication would take years to develop and/or a targeted recruitment of members with cyber technology expertise

Organizational Legitimacy has resulted from a unique combination of strong leadership style, strategic branding, and consistent message (in other words, “ISIL Sells Success”). Our conclusion is that this strategy of promoting itself as a successful organization and with a pure mission (ideological superiority) leads to a perception of organizational legitimacy, which is particularly magnetic in an environment that is rife with corruption, poor governance, and distrust of existing institutions (see section on Organizational Legitimacy and Branding). Specifically, we conclude that ISIL obtained an intangible reputation by combining resources such as leadership, structure, marketing, and performance, influencing brand communities (i.e., sympathizers) to form stronger ties to their organization as it increases in legitimacy, or promotes itself as a reputable, high-performing organization. In particular, ISIL spends a great deal of time and resources on communicating aspects of its legitimacy both to (1) its local populace and (2) the broader umma. First, ISIL established a strong organizational brand by using their split with AQC to promote their organization as ideologically “pure” and establishing themselves as a durable movement with sustainable resources and capabilities (e.g., controlling critical infrastructure and natural resources). Second, ISIL is capitalizing on discontent with the current regimes in Iraq and Syria and garnering public support by providing basic services such as access to food, water, charity distribution, sharia courts, and education. A key difference between ISIL and other global jihad VEOs is its rapidly increased capacity to govern once it has taken control of a region or province. Finally, as the idea of ISIL becomes more diffuse across the region and more broadly disseminated (through mass media and peer-to-peer publicity, establishing control of territory, and offering intangible services), the ISIL organization is turning into a social movement, which is highly attractive to the broader umma and local populations. Thus, we determine that the combination of resources and capabilities contributing to the overall legitimacy of ISIL is rare and difficult to imitate by competing organizations.

In conclusion, we offer unique insights gained from examining ISIL through a business model. Using this strategic management lens, we found support for the hypothesis that ISIL is a durable movement in the geographic region it currently holds because of its rare, unique, and inimitable resources and capabilities.

Appendix A

Organizational Characteristics

Constructs to be content coded were drawn from reviews of prior studies of ideological, violent, and cell-based vs. hierarchical organizations from the LEADIR project. Once the list of initial organizational characteristics was identified, three graduate students in organizational psychology and a Ph.D. used the relevant literature to form BARS for markers of each dimension. Likert-type scale items were created to operationalize the theoretical differences between organizations within the broader industry. One goal of this project was to identify markers of organizational resources, capabilities, and sophistication that could be accounted for by characteristics of the organization and that would highlight differences between the competing organizations within their industry. Consequently, characteristics of more traditional organizations that predict innovation were applied to our sample, including organizational structure, formalization, leadership characteristics, ideology, human capital, and tactics or strategies. These characteristics include both objective markers and scales in order to address a range of differences between organizations. Table 8 outlines the list of organizational characteristics that were coded for the present effort.

Table 8. Summary of Organizational Characteristics⁷²

Organizational and Leadership Characteristics	
<p><u>Group Identification</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Height of Power 2. Use of Violence 3. Geographic Location <p><u>Organizational Structure</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hierarchical Structure 2. Deterritorialization 3. Degree of Departmentalization 4. Unit Dependency or Autonomy 5. Higher Level Member Importance 6. Radicalization of Members 7. Internal/External Fundraising Opportunities <p><u>Organizational Tactics</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Technical Training 2. Violence Used as Punishment 3. Punishment Used as Control 4. Violent Themes Used in Storytelling 5. Isolation of Members 6. Member Occupation 7. Competition for Funding and Recruitment 8. Surface-Level Diversity 9. Deep-Level Diversity 10. Provocation by the Government <p><u>Formalization</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use of Titles 2. Distinction between Members 3. Use of Uniforms 4. Use of Symbols 5. Application Process 6. Member Census 	<p><u>Mission and Ideology</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Audience 2. Othering 3. Leftist 4. Purely Religious 5. Purely Ethnonationalist 6. Religious and Ethnonationalist 7. Religious but not Ethnonationalist 8. Ethnonationalist but not Religious 9. Islamic 10. Internationality of Mission Statement or Purpose 11. Scope of Promotional Activities/Attacks <p><u>Leadership</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leader Name 2. First Lieutenant Name 3. Leadership Style – Charismatic, Ideological, or Pragmatic 4. Leadership Style – Personalized or Socialized 5. Leadership Power 6. Leader Chosen by Higher Being 7. Leaders are Adored 8. Leaders Depicted with Weapons or Violent Imagery 9. Leader Definability 10. First Lieutenant Definability 11. First Lieutenant Top Management Team Followers Style 12. Other Members’ Top Management Team Followers Style

⁷² Codebook available upon request

Performance

Based on work from the LEADIR project, information about organizational-level performance was drawn from a variety of sources in which either organizational or attack outcomes (during height of power) were described. Typically this period of performance is determined by not only their height of activity and growth as an organization, but also by their leadership. Organizations were examined separately if the organization significantly changed under the new leadership. Consequently, for an organization like the Islamic State, we evaluated their performance over time under al-Zarqawi's leadership (organization known as al-Qa'ida in Iraq, Tawhid w'al Jihad, and al-Zarqawi network between 2004 and 2006), al-Masri's leadership (organization was rebranded as the Islamic State in Iraq and maintained the name al-Qa'ida in Iraq between 2007 and 2010), and Baghdadi's leadership (organization was referred to as al-Qa'ida in Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and the Islamic State from 2010 to the present). The focus for the scope of this report is the final period of performance for the Islamic State under Baghdadi's leadership. Performance was assessed both at the organization- and attack levels (Table 9), and organizational resources and capabilities were assessed using SMEs in various industries (e.g., strategic management, information science and technology innovation, organizational psychology, sociology, and political science).

Table 9. How We Coded VEO Performance

Organizational-Level	Attack-Level
<p><u>Long-Term Success</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of Members 2. Membership (Ordinal) 3. Total Age of Organization 4. Total Years of Height of Power 5. Proportion of Height of Power to Total Age 6. Beneficial Governmental/Political Reaction 7. Detrimental Governmental/Political Reaction 8. Negative Public Reaction 9. Positive Public Reaction 10. Overall Goal Attainment 11. Large Scale Influence <p><u>Notoriety</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Objective counts from GTD and media hits 2. Comparative Reputation 3. Cultural Reputation 4. Publicity 5. Cruelty <p><u>Fundraising</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Objective Categorical Markers (e.g., munificence) 2. Novelty of Fundraising Tactics 3. Short-Term Effectiveness of Fundraising Tactics 4. Long-Term Effectiveness of Fundraising Tactics 5. Destructiveness of Fundraising Tactics <p><u>Recruitment</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Objective Categorical Markers (e.g., size) 2. Novelty of Recruitment Tactics 3. Effectiveness of Recruitment Tactics 4. Targeting Vulnerable Populations 5. Diversification of Tactics 	<p><u>Originality</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Target Type 2. Weapon Type 3. Attack Type 4. Expectancy of Attack within Target Culture 5. Uniqueness of Weapon Used at the Time 6. Uniqueness of Attack Method at the Time <p><u>Quality</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conformity of Attack to Ideology 2. Furthering the Organization’s Plan and Cause 3. Level of Execution <p><u>Complexity</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of Perpetrators 2. Sequential Attacks 3. Level of Coordination 4. Level of Expertise <p><u>Destructiveness</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exact Monetary Damage 2. Category of Monetary Damage 3. Number of Fatalities 4. Number of Injuries 5. Number of Hostages/Kidnapped Persons 6. Length of Abduction/Kidnapping 7. Fate of Hostages 8. Physical Infrastructural Damage 9. Importance of Victims to Target Culture 10. Scope of Attack’s Impact of Processes 11. Importance of Process Affected by Attack 12. Symbolic Nature of Target(s)