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The Formation of the ISIS Takfiri Movement from the Perspective of Governance in Public Law

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East region has faced numerous challenges and security crises in recent years, particularly following the events of September 11, 2001, the effects of which have remained directly or indirectly embedded in the collective memory of nations, especially the peoples of the region. The expansionist ambitions of major powers in the region, combined with the ideological rigidity of certain Islamist political and religious factions, constitute one of the most significant factors that have intensified not only political conflicts but also sectarian tensions. The primary concern and research problem of the present study is to identify the central causes of insecurity and to trace its roots within the Middle East. The persistence of insecurity in countries such as Iraq and Syria has, in turn, contributed to the continuation of instability in neighboring states, including Iran, potentially generating adverse security consequences for the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Consequently, determining appropriate approaches to addressing this issue has become a matter of serious intellectual and policy concern. Iraq has long been an influential actor in regional equations, and its critical role in the geopolitical competition among major powers cannot be overlooked, as many regional political transformations over approximately the past four decades have stemmed from developments within Iraq and from the prevailing political and security conditions in that country. This article seeks to analyze the role of regional and global actors in political dynamics and power cycles across different states and ultimately advances the argument that the insecurity observed in the region is the result of prolonged strategic interventions, exploitation of structural vulnerabilities within states, and financial as well as military support provided by powerful countries.

Keywords: Wahhabism; Takfir/Takfiri Movements; Salaf; Salafism; ISIS; Regional Actors; National and Regional Security.

Introduction

British colonialism, through its divide-and-rule policy, sought to promote Wahhabism among Sunni communities and the Bahá'í movement among Shi'a populations in order to secure its security interests and political benefits through the management of divisions within the Muslim world. Accordingly, during the period of British dominance in Iran, members associated with the Bahá'í community reportedly enjoyed privileged positions within governmental structures, to the extent that during the reign of the second Pahlavi monarch, the ruling system was perceived as being influenced by Bahá'í networks. Following the collapse of the Pahlavi regime, Britain and the United States



undertook extensive efforts to defend remaining Bahá'í elements and have continued their support, maintaining expectations regarding their political influence.

Political tensions and conflicts generated by such movements may lead to increasing insecurity within societies, ultimately producing security challenges and regional crises. The experience derived from the Taliban's emergence at the beginning of the twenty-first century, together with destabilizing interventions attributed to United States policies in the Middle East, contributed to conflicts manifested partly through sectarian mobilization and the spread of insecurity across Islamic countries (1, 2).

The crisis that began in Iraq with the appearance of the Takfiri organization known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) at the beginning of the current Gregorian year and intensified within subsequent months represents the outcome of sectarian conflicts rooted in earlier foreign interventions in the region, thereby facilitating the continuation of crisis production and instability (3, 4).

It may therefore be argued that ISIS constitutes the product of ideological disputes among regional Takfiri movements as well as power rivalries among regional actors, shaped and guided by influential political players engaged in crisis formation in Iraq and the wider Middle East (5, 6).

A significant portion of global security equations has emerged within arenas of competition among major regional and international powers. The most severely affected element in these geopolitical exchanges has been human capital and the vital interests of dependent states. Although the outward appearance of such political arrangements may initially remain obscure, deeper analysis reveals profound consequences for the strategic, sensitive, and value-based interests of targeted nations and oppressed societies. Sectarian engineering has functioned as one of the mechanisms for achieving these objectives, implemented through indirect guidance by hegemonic political actors. The geopolitical conditions of the Middle East have therefore enabled dominance-seeking powers to pursue their objectives by managing political-religious tensions, a process that today finds concrete expression in the emergence of ISIS (7-9).

Although hidden actors behind these developments publicly deny any relationship with such organizations, the passage of time is expected to reveal many underlying realities. These realities will likely become clearer through future internal disclosures, ideological fragmentation, and intra-organizational divergences among the principal architects of regional tensions.

The ISIS terrorist organization, claiming to establish an Islamic government in Iraq, has carried out actions far removed from humanitarian values, committing atrocities that have deeply shocked the conscience of free-thinking individuals worldwide (3).

Research Literature and Theoretical Foundations

Given the recent emergence of this organization, no comprehensive scientific research had yet been conducted at the time of writing. Nevertheless, numerous books, articles, and academic theses addressing Salafi ideology and the role of regional actors in the emergence of ISIS have been produced. Among the most significant works is *Fundamentalism and Salafism*, published by Imam Sadiq University in 2013, which examines intellectual and doctrinal foundations of Salafi thought (1, 2).

Historical Backgrounds of Salafism.

This article by Ahmad Pakatchi analyzes Salafism through three historical waves: the formative period, the intellectual phase associated with Ibn Taymiyyah, and the Wahhabi movement in Arabia. The author argues that the third wave generated dangerous consequences whose influence extended into several Islamic countries, positioning Saudi Arabia as a central hub for Wahhabi ideology and the dissemination of Salafi thought (2).

Salafi Fundamentalism.

Authored jointly by Hosseini Houshang and Mahmoud Seifi, this work examines the intellectual foundations of Salafism. Core doctrinal principles include revival of the practices of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, rejection of independent juridical reasoning (ijtihad), and denial of later historical developments within Islamic civilization, particularly those emerging during the medieval period (5, 6).

Reconsidering Salafism with Emphasis on the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Written by Mohammad-Reza Tabatabaei and Abdolhamid Afrakhteh, this study outlines the historical roots of Salafism and later developments within Islamist movements in Egypt. The main section focuses on Taliban and Al-Qaeda ideologies and analyzes the domestic and international conditions leading to their formation. Among the principal causes identified are the inability of Afghan Mujahideen leaders to establish an inclusive state, ethnic competition, widespread poverty, tribalism, Pakistani intervention, United States involvement to counter communist influence, and the broader regional impact of the Iranian Islamic Revolution (1).

In completing the literature review, several academic databases and research websites were consulted, including Noor and SID. Most available materials introduced articles related to Salafi ideology and affiliated movements; however, substantial scholarly analysis specifically addressing ISIS remained limited at that stage.

In a 2015 thesis, Mojtaba Montazer argued that persistent patterns of neglect and analytical indifference within regional political analysis have produced a cognitive crisis in understanding Middle Eastern developments. ISIS represents a recent example of terrorist organizations whose expansion during the Iraqi crisis was accompanied by coordinated media campaigns—particularly by Saudi-affiliated media outlets—seeking to portray ISIS as secretly supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran and aligned with Iranian regional interests (4).

Similarly, Ali Leyali (2015) observed that Iran and Saudi Arabia, as traditional regional actors in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, have historically interacted more through rivalry than cooperation. Saudi Arabia has expressed concern regarding the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen and has framed itself as a principal defender of Sunni interests. Consequently, support for anti-Shi'a forces such as ISIS has been interpreted as an attempt to rebalance regional power dynamics. The study concludes that although ISIS emerged partly from ideological conflicts, military measures alone cannot eliminate it; rather, political solutions based on cooperation among regional powers remain necessary (10, 11).

Definitions and Concepts

Wahhabism

Wahhabism is a religious movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in eighteenth-century Najd in the Arabian Peninsula and formally adopted by the Saudi ruling family in 1744. Wahhabi doctrine advocates a

fundamental purification of Islam and considers practices such as tomb visitation and the veneration of certain individuals to constitute manifestations of polytheism. Its central objective is a return to what are perceived as authentic teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition (Sunnah), accompanied by opposition to all religious innovations (*bid'ah*) (2, 6).

Ideologically, Wahhabism draws heavily upon the theological ideas of Ibn Taymiyyah and, in jurisprudential terms, aligns with the Hanbali school of Islamic law. The movement has inspired numerous religious currents throughout the Islamic world—from India and Sumatra to Sudan and North Africa—and has influenced movements such as the Taliban and other twentieth-century Islamist groups (5).

Followers of Wahhabism refer to themselves as *al-Muwahhidun* ("the monotheists"), a designation derived from their strong emphasis on the absolute unity of God (*tawhid*). Practices interpreted as implying associationism, including tomb visitation and saint veneration, are therefore prohibited. Wahhabi doctrine stresses literal interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah and emphasizes the establishment of an Islamic state grounded in Islamic jurisprudence (6).

In contemporary usage, the term Wahhabism has been applied to several related phenomena: Salafism, jihadist activism, dominant religious practices in Saudi Arabia, literalist interpretations of Islamic sources, ritual-centered expressions of religion emphasizing formal correctness, and, more broadly, movements presenting Islam or Islamic terminology as their principal ideological reference (1, 5).

Such interpretive frameworks may lead to the practice of *takfir*, whereby individuals who disagree with a particular interpretation of Islam are declared unbelievers and thus legitimate targets of jihad. Consequently, this perspective is often characterized as representing an interpretation of Islam marked by limited tolerance and diminished pluralism (6).

Takfiri Movements

Takfir is a verbal noun derived from the Arabic form *taf'īl*, meaning "to cover" or "to conceal," while its triliteral roots (*kafara* and *kufr*) carry a similar semantic meaning. The term also conveys meanings such as attributing disbelief or irreligion to another person.

In theological and jurisprudential terminology, *takfir* refers to "attributing unbelief to a Muslim," in other words, declaring fellow Muslims to be unbelievers. Takfiri movements denote a collection of ideas, beliefs, and practices adopted by individuals, groups, or even governments that recognize only their own interpretation of Islam as legitimate and attempt to impose their preferred principles, rules, and version of Islamic law through coercion and violence. A rigid and literalist reading of the Prophetic tradition and purely outward interpretations of Qur'anic verses constitute defining characteristics of Takfiri movements (5, 6).

Takfiri movements represent extremist imitation-based trends within Muslim societies, largely influenced by the intellectual orientation of Ibn Taymiyyah. They reject the role of rational reasoning in legal deduction and oppose interpretive exegesis or allegorical interpretation. Granting primacy to the apparent meanings of religious law, they frequently oppose philosophy and mysticism. Through literalist theological interpretations—particularly regarding the doctrine of monotheism—many Muslims who do not share their views are labeled non-monotheists or polytheists, and in certain cases declared deserving of excommunication and even death (1, 2).

The destructive and anti-Islamic phenomenon of *takfir* originated alongside the emergence of the Khārijite movement in early Islamic history, which considered the killing of opponents religiously permissible. In the past two

centuries, this phenomenon was redefined and expanded by Wahhabi movements, contributing to its modern revival (6).

The Takfiri discourse possesses extremist terrorist operational branches manifested in organizations such as Al-Qaeda in the Middle East, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Jihad and Tawhid Group, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Sipah-e-Sahaba in the Indian subcontinent, Jaish al-Adl and Jundallah along the Iran–Pakistan border, Al-Nusra Front in Syria, and ISIS in Iraq and Syria (3, 4).

A shared feature among many of these groups is the excommunication of Shi'a Muslims. For instance, Abdullah ibn Jibrin, a prominent Saudi religious authority, declared Shi'a Muslims unbelievers based on allegations such as criticism of the Qur'an, rejection of Prophetic traditions and canonical hadith collections, accusations of declaring Sunnis unbelievers, and alleged exaggeration in reverence toward Imam 'Ali and the Imams. According to this view, even charitable payments to Shi'a Muslims were considered invalid because they allegedly strengthened disbelief and opposed the Prophetic tradition (6).

Salaf

The term *Salaf* linguistically means “predecessor” or “those who came before.” Derived from the verb *salafa*, it conveys the sense of precedence or earlier existence. According to Ibn Fāris, the root denotes priority and precedence; therefore, *Salaf* refers to those belonging to earlier generations. In this relative sense, every era becomes the *Salaf* of the future and the *Khalaf* (successor) of the past.

The concept of *Salaf* differs between Sunni and Shi'a traditions. In Sunni thought, *Salaf* refers to three generations of Muslims: the Companions (*Sahaba*), the Followers (*Tabi'un*), and the Followers of the Followers. Due to their temporal proximity to revelation, these generations are considered the best of humanity, supported by the well-known Prophetic narration stating: “The best people are my generation, then those who follow them, and then those who follow them” (1).

Within Shi'a theology, the concept of *Salaf* is also acknowledged but usually qualified as *al-Salaf al-Ṣālih* (the righteous predecessors). Unlike the Sunni doctrine affirming the collective justice of all Companions, Shi'a scholarship maintains that some Companions committed actions undermining their moral integrity; therefore, unconditional imitation of all Companions is rejected. Shi'a interpretations cite Qur'anic references and historical conflicts among Companions as evidence of the presence of hypocrites among them and argue that only those closely associated with the Prophet's Household (*Ahl al-Bayt*) are legitimately worthy of emulation (12).

Salafism

One derivative of *Salaf* is *Salafism* (*Salafiyya*), referring to an intellectual or doctrinal orientation encompassing a specific set of beliefs. The use of the term “Salafism” does not extend far back into early Islamic history; prior to the seventh Islamic century, expressions such as *Ahl al-Hadith* or *Ashab al-Hadith* were more common. Although these earlier concepts share certain similarities with modern Salafism, they were never historically presented as an independent sect competing with other Islamic schools (2).

According to Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, Salafism represents a relatively recent and unintended phenomenon characterized by exclusivist claims to authentic Islam while labeling others as unbelievers. It is

described as a self-proclaimed movement that adopts the symbolic identity of the righteous predecessors while paradoxically undermining genuine religious unity.

Salafism—often regarded as the ideological foundation of Wahhabism—asserts that no formal schools of jurisprudence should exist and advocates a return to the era of the early generations. This position dismisses centuries of scholarly achievements produced by Islamic legal schools, despite their role in preserving the dynamism of Islamic jurisprudence and enabling adaptation to changing social needs (5, 6).

During the twelfth century (Islamic calendar), Salafi movements emerged in regions such as Najd, Hijaz, and the Indian subcontinent. With external political support—particularly from Britain in Najd and Hijaz—these movements expanded significantly. In contemporary geopolitics, Salafism has also been interpreted as a strategic instrument used by external powers to pursue political objectives within Islamic societies (7, 8).

ISIS

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is a terrorist organization whose members have operated in parts of Iraq and Syria. The group represents a continuation of a jihadist Salafi organization in Iraq led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, formerly affiliated with Al-Qaeda, who was killed in Iraq in 2006.

Leadership of ISIS was later assumed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a figure emerging from factions that separated from the Al-Qaeda network. The group's slogan, *Baqiya wa Tatamaddad* ("Remaining and Expanding"), reflects its claim of permanence, invincibility, expansion, and ultimate victory, alongside its declared ambition to establish an Islamic caliphate across Muslim territories (3, 4).

Regional Actors

Regional actors primarily include states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and others which, alongside support from Britain and the United States, have been described as contributing to shifts in regional balance through financial and military assistance, thereby influencing conflict dynamics and power competition in the Middle East (10, 11).

National Security

National security refers to the condition in which a nation and its population remain protected and safeguarded. A society enjoys national security when its essential needs and vital values are relatively secure from diverse and comprehensive threats, while quantitative and qualitative improvements in citizens' living standards continue in accordance with temporal demands and global transformations. In other words, national security denotes the relative protection of a nation's vital interests, values, and needs against internal, external, and natural threats across military, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions, alongside the sustained growth of state capacity to respond to the evolving expectations of its population. Compared with individual security, national security holds greater priority because it encompasses collective interests and values, emphasizing the primacy of public welfare over individual benefit (10, 13).

Regional Security

Security, in its regional dimension, is most comprehensively conceptualized within the intellectual trajectory of the Copenhagen School of security studies under the concept of the “Regional Security Complex.” Morgan and Lake, in *Regional Orders*, summarize Barry Buzan’s definition of regional security as follows: a regional security complex consists of a group of states connected through a distinct and significant network of security relations that produces a high level of security interdependence among members; in such a system, the primary security concerns of states are so closely interconnected that their national securities cannot realistically be understood independently of one another (13).

Islamic Fundamentalism

After a prolonged historical period marked by the experience or idealization of secularism, the global order—particularly since the second half of the twentieth century—has witnessed various forms of religious revival and return to faith. Within the Islamic world, this return has manifested in revivalist, reformist, and fundamentalist currents. Among these, fundamentalist movements have gained significant prominence in recent decades. Due to their political—and at times military—character, these movements have exerted wide-ranging influence on political, social, and even economic developments worldwide, becoming one of the most debated subjects not only in political and media discourse but also within academic scholarship (5).

The term *fundamentalism*, originally a Western analytical concept, was adopted by researchers to describe a broad spectrum of revivalist, Salafi-oriented, and Islamist movements which, despite internal diversity, share a common orientation toward returning to the Qur’an and the foundational doctrinal and practical principles of early Islam while seeking political revitalization through purification of religious practice (2, 6).

Conceptual clarification of fundamentalism and related notions—such as Islamism, political Islam, revolutionary Islam, reformism, revivalism, and Islamic awakening—as well as distinguishing between diverse Sunni and non-Sunni Salafi movements and identifying ideological differences between these currents and the Islamic Republic of Iran, constitutes an essential analytical task. Such differentiation requires careful examination of both theoretical and practical components of these movements and recognition of their spectrum of ideological variation. In many cases, differences arise from excessive emphasis on a single doctrinal principle rather than a balanced interpretive approach.

A comparison between the terms *Salafism* and *fundamentalism* reveals that the former possesses centuries of historical usage, whereas the application of “fundamentalism” to Islamic movements emerged only during the 1960s. Early applications of the concept were based on generalized interpretations of two prominent Islamic movements that appeared during the 1930s and 1940s: the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jamaat-e-Islami in India, although neither movement identified itself with the label of fundamentalism. Certain writings from the 1950s described these movements as new—and even the largest—Islamic movements of their time (5).

Beginning in the 1970s, fundamentalism entered a new historical phase. Intellectual movements advocating a “return to the self,” motivated both by perceived civilizational decline (*al-Nakbah*) and by efforts to restore cultural identity in countries such as Iran and Egypt, expanded the conceptual scope of fundamentalism and broadened its practical manifestations (14).

The semantic expansion of fundamentalism during this decade produced an important consequence: the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 came to be interpreted by some Western analysts as a form of Islamic fundamentalist revival. From that point onward, a term previously associated primarily with Sunni movements began to be applied to both Shi'a and Sunni contexts (9).

Islamism clearly emerged in direct opposition to secularism. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran represented not only the formation of a Shi'a-based religious state but also a symbolic challenge to political secularism. Another prominent example of this ideological confrontation appeared in Turkey. Since the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Turkish Republic had represented a model of secular governance in an Islamic society emphasizing strict separation of religion and state. However, following the spread of Islamic political movements—particularly after developments in Iran—Turkey experienced a resurgence of political Islam challenging its secular foundations, an issue that became a subject of academic discussion by the early 1980s (7, 8).

If the 1970s represented transformation in the conceptual application of fundamentalism, the 1980s marked renewed attention to the concept of Salafism and debate over its expanding meanings and applications. During this decade, various political Islamic movements and anti-innovation religious calls adopted the Salafi label to claim legitimacy for their ideological positions, while critics simultaneously scrutinized and challenged such exclusive claims (2).

The 1980s also constituted an important turning point in defining the referent of fundamentalism. While the Iranian Revolution popularized the notion of Islamism aimed at establishing Islamic governance, events in Egypt introduced another dimension. The assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat on October 6, 1981, along with subsequent developments within Salafi-oriented movements, contributed to linking political Islam with acts of political violence and terrorism in certain analytical frameworks. Some analysts argued that movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood underwent gradual radicalization through successive political phases, while others cautioned against equating all forms of fundamentalism with terrorism (5).

Throughout the 1990s, the expansion of political Islam across different Muslim societies and the increasing visibility of fundamentalist movements attracted heightened attention among Western scholars. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the integration of large portions of former Soviet Central Asia into the broader Islamic world further intensified these developments. Simultaneously, manifestations of fundamentalist tendencies among adherents of other religions expanded the relevance of fundamentalism beyond Islam alone (14).

The growth of violence-oriented fundamentalism continued through the late twentieth century, reflected in successive global political events and extensive scholarly production in both Islamic and Western intellectual contexts. A major turning point widely identified in the history of contemporary fundamentalism was the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001. Regardless of debates concerning ultimate responsibility, many analyses attributed the operation to Al-Qaeda, which subsequently became widely recognized as one of the most prominent terrorist organizations of the early twenty-first century (15, 16).

Understanding a multidimensional and complex phenomenon such as fundamentalism requires examination of its historical roots, developmental trajectories, and critical turning points. As an interdisciplinary subject, fundamentalism has attracted scholarly attention across political science, economics, sociology, psychology, educational sciences, ethics, cultural studies, and communication studies. Employing indigenous and Islamic intellectual capacities alongside academic analysis enables deeper understanding independent of exclusively Western interpretive frameworks.

With such an analytical foundation, examining the defining characteristics and theoretical bases of fundamentalist movements, developing typologies, studying the factors behind their contemporary rise, analyzing the regional and international security challenges they generate, assessing their relationship with other Islamic currents such as traditional clerical institutions and modern religious intellectuals, and evaluating their positions regarding strategic concepts such as justice, development, modernity, and culture can lead to a comprehensive understanding of Islamic fundamentalism.

Islamic fundamentalism may therefore be described as a movement grounded in core Islamic values, viewing the success and prosperity of Muslim societies as dependent upon a return to those foundational principles rather than imitation of Western or Eastern models. The movement represents, in many respects, an emotional, spiritual, and ideological reaction by Muslims to economic, social, and political crises, arising not only from fear of cultural Westernization but also from perceived Western intervention in Islamic lands. In this sense, Islamic fundamentalism signifies thinking and acting according to inherited religious traditions rooted in faith while manifesting politically in social and governmental structures (5).

Shirin Hunter defines fundamentalism as adherence to religious laws in their original and pure form. From this perspective, Islamic fundamentalism is indeed fundamentalist; however, its distinctive and controversial characteristic lies in its comprehensive political and ideological interpretation of Islam. Critics argue that superficial interpretations advanced by certain fundamentalist groups have encouraged portrayals of Islam as incompatible with modern life, contemporary science, technology, and democracy, presenting it as inherently violent or intolerant.

From the viewpoint of Islamic fundamentalists, preservation of the outward manifestations of religious law constitutes the ultimate objective. These manifestations include strict implementation of juridical rulings, enforcement of religious punishments, observance of dress codes, and avoidance of prohibited acts. Social, scientific, and economic development may be regarded as secondary concerns compared to safeguarding Islam itself. Fundamentalists advocate a return to the *Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ*—the early Muslim generations—believing their proximity to the Prophetic era ensured correct understanding of religion. Consequently, Islamic fundamentalism seeks the complete and unconditional revival of Sharia and supports establishment of a religious state dedicated to its implementation. According to this ideological outlook, once an Islamic state is established, the Islamic community bears responsibility for promoting its ideology globally through jihad, dividing the world ideologically into *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Kufr*, with expansion justified as a religious duty.

Typology of Salafi–Takfiri Groups

First Group:

A “secular” current is identified, referred to as the “sovereignty” current or the *malikiyya* current, which is presented as the mainstream, state-centered form of Wahhabism that has existed since the twelfth Islamic century. This current—described as the religious branch of Wahhabism, or “court Wahhabism”—is institutionally linked to the House of Saud. In this account, Wahhabism rests on two pillars: religion and politics. The religious pillar has, from the outset, been associated with the Al al-Shaykh lineage, i.e., the descendants of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, while the political pillar has remained in the hands of the Al Saud. The functional relationship between the two is described as follows: the House of Saud provides security for Al al-Shaykh, while Al al-Shaykh supplies legitimacy for the state; hence, the relationship is portrayed as structurally complementary. The Saudi state is

described as supporting Wahhabism insofar as it remains politically useful; however, even within contemporary Saudi Arabia, radical Salafi currents hostile to the state have expanded, and in provinces such as al-Qassim they are characterized as strongly anti-government. The Saudi state, in turn, perceives that certain Wahhabi orientations have adopted adversarial positions toward the government. Institutions referenced in this context include bodies such as *Lajnat al-'Ulama*, the Council of Senior Scholars, the Islamic University of Medina, and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (5, 6).

Second Group:

A second trend is associated with *Ikhwan al-Muslimin*, which is said to have staged an uprising in the year 1400 (Islamic calendar). This current is described as holding that the rulers of the House of Saud have deviated from Wahhabi foundations and have therefore abandoned Wahhabi doctrine; on this basis, it adopted an anti-state posture, rose in opposition, and is portrayed as confronting the government intensely (5, 6).

Third Group:

A third current is identified as *Qutbism (Qutbiyya)*, described as a revolutionary trend. After the *malikiyya* and *Ikhwan* trends, another development within Wahhabism is presented as having taken a Takfiri orientation, with the principal emblem of Takfiri Salafism emerging in Al-Qaeda. In this framing, Al-Qaeda's leadership is associated with affluent social strata, and Qutbism is portrayed as an alternative Wahhabi-inflected current opposed to "court Wahhabism," rooted in the ideas of Sayyid Qutb and positioned as a Saudi current with origins in Saudi Arabia (5, 6).

Fourth Group:

A final current is described as fostering "Neo-Salafis." From within this stream, two tendencies are highlighted: "Neo-Salafis" as moderate faces of a Saudi Qutbi reading, who argue, first, that the state should be constitutional rather than absolute, and who also raised themes such as exploitation and colonialism. In 2003, when the United States established bases in Saudi Arabia for confronting Iraq, this current is described as denouncing such presence as illegitimate and strongly opposing it; many figures—identified as major Saudi scholars—were reportedly imprisoned for insisting that the United States should not be allowed to maintain active bases in an Islamic country. In the 1970s, they are said to have formed a "Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights," described as simultaneously influenced by modern Western thought and attached to Wahhabi ideas, while also leaning toward discourse and dialogue. This current is portrayed as emerging from Qutbism and as critically oriented toward the dominant ideology and toward resisting unjust rulers; however, it is characterized as lacking a Takfiri tendency to excommunicate other Muslims. In this account, the current introduced rational considerations into Wahhabi thought, argued for the growth of civil rights, and advocated transformation toward constitutional government. Its members are described as combining Qutbi-inspired political critique with the outlook of educated scholars shaped by modern intellectual space and rejecting absolute or totalitarian governance (5, 13).

The culmination of the tension between Wahhabi clerical establishments and Neo-Salafis is described as becoming particularly visible during the first Gulf War, when the establishment of U.S. military bases in Saudi Arabia produced disputes over how a non-Muslim power could establish a military presence in sacred Islamic lands and use that presence to attack other Muslim countries. Many of these figures are described as confronting the state

and challenging the Council of Senior Scholars, arguing that unbelievers cannot establish bases in an Islamic country. The leading figure of this Neo-Salafi current is identified as Salman al-Awda, who is said to have been expelled (5).

The growth of Takfiri currents within Salafism is then linked to the announcement of a “World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders,” attributed to the leadership of Osama bin Laden (Saudi) and Ayman al-Zawahiri (Egyptian), which further intensified attention to militant orientations. The events of September 11, 2001 are presented as a pivotal turning point in contemporary history. The Salafi Islamist current, which after Saudi Arabia appeared in the form of Taliban fighters, is described as having endangered the interests of numerous regional states. This current, while differing with other Sunni groups, is characterized as displaying intense hostility toward Shi’a Muslims and as adopting harsh policies against them (1, 2, 15, 16).

British colonialism, through a divide-and-rule strategy, is described as attempting to promote Wahhabism among Sunnis and the Bahá’í movement among Shi’a in order to secure its interests by managing intra-Muslim divisions. During the period of British influence in Iran, Bahá’í elements are said to have held privileged governmental positions, and during the second Pahlavi era the state is portrayed as being administratively influenced by Bahá’í networks. After the fall of the Pahlavi regime, Britain and the United States are described as having sought to protect remaining Bahá’í elements and as continuing to support them. The text further claims that Al-Qaeda and ISIS were created to foment division and to “confront the Islamic Republic,” but that this strategy ultimately produced adverse consequences for its sponsors. It argues that a close and analytical reading of these developments suggests that the United States and its allies, in what they allegedly and falsely label “confronting ISIS,” are less focused on dismantling the roots of the phenomenon than on generating division and hostility among Muslims. In this framing, all those committed to Islam and accepting Qur’anic governance—whether Shi’a or Sunni—are urged to recognize that American–Zionist policies constitute the principal enemy of Islam and Muslims (7, 8, 10).

Following the formation of the “Tawhid and Jihad” group under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2004 and his pledge of allegiance to Osama bin Laden, the group is described as becoming Al-Qaeda’s Iraqi branch. It expanded its operations and became one of the most powerful terrorist groups in Iraq, until al-Zarqawi announced the formation of a “Mujahideen Shura Council” under Abdullah Rashid al-Baghdadi in 2006. After al-Zarqawi’s death in 2006, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir is described as being appointed leader, and later that year the “Islamic State of Iraq” was established under Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (3, 4).

On April 19, 2010, Iraqi and U.S. joint forces reportedly targeted a residence in the al-Tharthar area where Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir had taken refuge; after intensified exchanges of fire, aircraft bombed the location, resulting in their deaths. Their bodies were subsequently displayed publicly, and one week later the group acknowledged their deaths in an online statement. Around ten days thereafter, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was appointed as successor and new leader, and al-Nasir li-Din Allah Sulayman was introduced as minister of war (3).

With Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s rise, the scope of ISIS operations expanded; simultaneously, with the onset of the Syrian crisis, the group’s elements became active in Syria as well. The “Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham” is described as being formed in late 2011 as a branch of the “Islamic State in Iraq,” rapidly becoming a prominent actor. On April 9, 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi reportedly announced in an audio message the merger of Jabhat al-Nusra and the “Islamic State in Iraq,” thereby forming the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” (3, 4).

ISIS elements reportedly entered Fallujah in Anbar province in late December 2013 and early 2014, coinciding with Iraqi army operations to clear Anbar. The “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” is presented as having prepared

a multi-stage plan implemented through a defined timetable, with a first stage titled “Breaking the Walls” and a second stage titled “Destroying the Army” (3).

ISIS is ultimately characterized as a Salafi–Takfiri organization of acute danger, allegedly receiving financial and logistical support from Saudi Wahhabi networks. The text describes the group as violent and criminal, contributing to the stigmatization of Islam and religious thought, and asserts that it operates politically along the trajectory of Zionist and U.S. interests in the region. It is portrayed as fighting against the governments of Iraq and Syria because they purportedly act outside the orbit of U.S. policy. As an indicator of ISIS’s alignment with Zionist strategies, the text claims that anti-Israel slogans are absent from its discourse, whereas it consistently amplifies sectarian conflict and anti-Shi’a hostility (3, 7, 8, 10).

Finally, the text asserts that the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham drew inspiration from Islam in designing its plans and dividing them into phases, analogizing this to the Qur’an’s gradual revelation. It further claims that the group seeks transition from a “stage of Islamic statehood” to the establishment of a “true Islamic state,” requiring the destruction of all “idols” and the overthrow of “taghuts” who allegedly claim to be Muslim rulers in Islamic countries.

Backgrounds of the Emergence of Jihadi–Takfiri Groups

The Muslim Brotherhood historically maintained a relatively moderate orientation. However, a faction emerged from within this movement known as *Jihadi Salafism*, from which Al-Qaeda subsequently developed. When members of the Muslim Brotherhood came under intense pressure during the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, some individuals separated from the organization. Sayyid Qutb, who spent approximately ten years in prison, encountered the writings of Abul A’la Maududi, which argued that contemporary societies were living in a condition of *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic ignorance). Influenced by this perspective, Qutb authored *Ma’alim fi al-Tariq* (*Milestones*). Although the work itself is regarded by some as intellectually significant, later radical interpretations drew ideological inspiration from it. Qutb argued that humanity was living in the “ignorance of the twentieth century” and that those who accepted such conditions participated in major disbelief; consequently, Muslim cities—from Riyadh and Cairo to Baghdad and Tehran—were reinterpreted as societies of ignorance. The text emphasized three central themes: the existence of modern *jahiliyyah*, the necessity of migration away from corrupt societies, and the obligation to transform prevailing conditions (5, 6).

Radical youth factions within the Brotherhood who rejected the moderate approaches of figures such as Hasan al-Banna and Umar al-Tilmisani embraced Qutb’s revolutionary interpretation. Qutb’s analysis of global developments thus contributed to intellectual conditions that facilitated the emergence of Jihadi–Takfiri groups. He compared contemporary violence to pre-Islamic times, questioning whether earlier eras characterized by limited warfare could truly be called *jahiliyyah*, or whether modern periods—marked by massive casualties in twentieth-century global wars—represented a deeper moral crisis. From this viewpoint, technological advancement did not necessarily correspond to ethical progress, as humanity continued to engage in large-scale destruction (5).

Another defining characteristic of *jahiliyyah*, according to this interpretation, was corruption. While certain immoral practices existed before Islam, proponents argued that contemporary global systems—including arms trafficking, narcotics trade, and sexual exploitation—reflected forms of corruption surpassing those of earlier historical periods.

Migration and Jihad

Sayyid Qutb's ideas attracted considerable attention, and when followers sought practical solutions, two strategies were proposed. The first was *hijrah* (migration): departure from corrupt societies toward an authentic Islamic community. Because such an ideal society was perceived as absent, groups such as *al-Takfir wa al-Hijra* emerged, withdrawing from urban centers and attempting to establish isolated Islamic communities, though these experiments ultimately failed. The second proposal was *jihad*, interpreted as struggle to transform existing conditions. In later developments, this concept was often subject to distorted readings within parts of the Muslim world (1, 2).

Doctrinal Takfir versus Political Takfir

Based on Qutbist jihadist thought, organizations such as *al-Jihad* were formed, openly advocating militant struggle. Abd al-Salam Faraj led one such group and authored *al-Farida al-Gha'iba* ("The Neglected Duty"), arguing that jihad had disappeared from Islamic practice; this ideological framework was later invoked in the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

Although Qutb discussed jihad, his original argument focused primarily on resistance against corrupt rulers rather than violence against Islamic sects. His critique constituted what may be described as political excommunication rather than doctrinal excommunication; the intention was opposition to unjust governance rather than indiscriminate violence against Muslims based solely on theological differences. After Qutb's execution, his brother reportedly left Egypt and entered Saudi Arabia, contributing to the diffusion of these ideas into new intellectual environments (5).

Transformation from Anti-Westernism to Islamophobia

As ideological currents moved from Africa toward Asia, conditions intensified. Jihadi Salafist movements are described as having capitalized on waves of Islamic awakening while simultaneously redirecting anti-Western sentiment into internal Islamic conflict. Although the Muslim Brotherhood maintained reformist activity, radical Salafi tendencies expanded and influenced political movements. In Egypt, parties such as al-Nur, al-Fadila, al-Asala, and al-Islah emerged with varying Salafi orientations. In Syria, more than twenty-five Takfiri organizations—from Jabhat al-Nusra to ISIS and Ansar al-Sham—became active, contributing to large-scale casualties during the Syrian conflict (3, 4).

Across Africa, groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria carried out kidnappings and attacks on educational institutions, rejecting modern schooling as incompatible with their interpretation of Islam. In Algeria during the 1990s, armed Islamist movements committed widespread violence, while similar ideological tendencies later appeared in Tunisia under the name *Ansar al-Sharia*, provoking strong social and political opposition. In Somalia, the Takfiri group Al-Shabaab engaged in violent operations affecting Muslim populations themselves (4).

In Iraq, ISIS emerged as a prominent example of such movements, while related extremist networks appeared elsewhere in the region, including Lebanon. ISIS—an acronym for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham—originated as a branch of Al-Qaeda but later operated independently. Its roots trace back to an Al-Qaeda affiliate led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Although widely associated with Iraq, al-Zarqawi had previously participated in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, where Arab volunteers fought alongside Afghan forces. Over time, a distinct organizational structure developed that operated independently from Afghan Mujahideen formations and later

became known as Al-Qaeda. During that period, figures such as Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi were active simultaneously, although al-Zarqawi maintained organizational separation and attracted fighters from the Levant region, while Bin Laden and Zawahiri gathered militants from North Africa and the Arab Gulf (3, 15, 16).

Doctrinal Structure

From an ideological perspective, ISIS adheres to Salafism, a current broadly situated within Sunni traditions but not confined to any of the four classical Sunni legal schools. Within ISIS discourse, the development of a “jurisprudence of excommunication” (*fiqh al-takfir*) places violence at the core of its ideology, categorizing all beliefs outside Salafi doctrine as unbelief and legitimizing violent elimination of opponents as religious duty. Killing non-believers is interpreted as a path to salvation and martyrdom in the way of God (2, 6).

The intellectual foundations of Salafi and ISIS ideology may be analyzed across four dimensions: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and semantics.

In ontology, ISIS is described as rejecting metaphysical abstraction and even attributing corporeal characteristics to God, maintaining that divine vision will be possible on the Day of Judgment. Human spirit is interpreted as identical with the physical body, and realities beyond sensory perception are minimized, although the division between the unseen (*ghayb*) and the visible world (*shahada*) is acknowledged due to scriptural references to the afterlife.

In epistemology, ISIS emphasizes transmitted sources (*naql*) over rational inquiry, considering human reason incapable of achieving true knowledge. Consequently, understanding must rely exclusively on Qur’an, prophetic traditions, and consensus of early companions without independent reasoning (*ijtihad*). Rational speculation and modern intellectual achievements are frequently dismissed as sources of deviation or ignorance.

In semantics, ISIS adopts strict literalism and rejects allegorical interpretation. Following interpretations associated with Ibn Taymiyyah, scriptural descriptions of divine attributes are accepted without metaphorical explanation; therefore, expressions referring to divine “hand” or similar attributes are interpreted literally as possessing real existence.

Methodologically, ISIS prioritizes only the understanding of the *Salaf* (early generations). According to this approach, the interpretations of early Muslims constitute the sole legitimate authority, whereas philosophical or later intellectual interpretations are rejected as error or disbelief. Thus, its methodological foundation is characterized by literalism combined with historical regressionism, privileging past interpretations over evolving intellectual reasoning (5, 6).

Strategic Frameworks Surrounding Takfiri Movements

Many political–religious crises, destabilizing phenomena, and conflict-producing movements in the Middle East—including Takfiri movements—are interpreted within this analysis as outcomes linked to the implementation of strategic doctrines and geopolitical plans associated with United States foreign policy. Three major theoretical frameworks are discussed in this regard.

A) Henry Kissinger's Global Future Theory

Henry Kissinger, regarded as a major theorist of U.S. foreign policy, is described as arguing in his global strategic outlook that the United States must pursue an indirect occupation strategy across several Middle Eastern states in order to contain or bypass geopolitical competitors such as Russia and China. This strategy is presented as serving the stabilization of Western hegemony through corridor-building policies implemented under humanitarian pretexts in regions whose political orientations diverge from U.S. interests.

One example cited is the creation of a Kurdish geopolitical corridor spanning Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey, allegedly justified as support for Kurdish populations but functioning as a mechanism for regional management and strategic control. Another example concerns attempts to establish a Baluch corridor linking Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran to influence Central Asian dynamics—an initiative described as unsuccessful. Where such strategies cannot be fully implemented, alternative policies are said to include managing opposition behavior, slowing national development programs, delaying strategic processes, or diverting major national projects. Within this interpretive framework, the emergence of ISIS is viewed as potentially connected to efforts aimed at creating fragmentation within the Islamic world (7, 8, 10).

Kissinger's characterization of ISIS is presented as describing it as “a group of military adventurers possessing an aggressive ideology” capable of being controlled. This interpretation is used to argue that Western perspectives divide terrorism into two categories: “good terrorism,” aligned with Western interests, and “bad terrorism,” which either opposes Western interests or must operate under Western supervision (15).

B) The Theory of Constructive Chaos

The theory of “constructive chaos” (or “creative disorder”) is described as having historical roots in political sociology before entering security studies discourse. During the presidency of Richard Nixon, the concept was reportedly incorporated into U.S. foreign policy through strategic adaptations associated with Zbigniew Brzezinski and subsequently emphasized as a principle of U.S. national security policy.

The theoretical foundation of this approach rests on the notion that generating crises and instability within a country or region can secure long-term strategic stability for dominant actors. The strategy may include fragmentation of stable states into smaller ethnically homogeneous entities and the creation of persistent conflicts. In simplified terms, the policy aims at weakening strong states so that they cannot pose strategic threats to superior powers (11, 14).

The concept of “constructive chaos” is described as neither an innovation of President George W. Bush nor Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice but rather a continuation of earlier strategic thinking that gained operational momentum following the September 11, 2001 attacks. According to this interpretation, the approach continued under successive U.S. administrations, including during the presidency of Barack Obama. The strategy involves intervention in countries whose policies conflict with U.S. interests and the pursuit of goals through controlled instability supported by media influence and coordinated internal and external actors. The Syrian crisis is presented as an example, where instability allegedly aimed at regime change and removal of Damascus from the regional “resistance axis.” Similar patterns are said to have appeared in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan (8, 10).

C) Colin Powell's Greater Middle East Initiative

The Greater Middle East Plan attributed to Colin Powell is described as a project designed to restructure the political, cultural, and social order of the Middle East in ways that enhance U.S. regional interests while ensuring long-term security for Israel.

The principal objectives attributed to this plan include:

- Ensuring the security of Israel
- Guaranteeing uninterrupted energy flows
- Containing the expansion of Islamist movements
- Promoting the emergence of secular political regimes across the region (7, 11).

Foundations of Governance in International Law

One of the most important indicators of governmental legitimacy concerns governance quality and the effectiveness with which governments manage public affairs and fulfill societal functions. The distinction between “good governance” and “bad governance,” widely discussed since the 1980s, refers to improvements in the exercise of authority based on close interaction between government and society, effective public service delivery, accountability, responsibility, enhancement of living standards, and cultivation of public cooperation and loyalty. Policies promoting justice, security, stability, tax reduction, infrastructure development, and employment expansion are considered core indicators of good governance. Conversely, violence and protest movements against governments are often linked to corruption, discrimination, and ineffective governance structures (13).

In the case of Iraq, the absence of good governance is attributed to multiple structural factors. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi society lacked a strong central authority, and until 2004 governance functions were exercised directly by coalition forces. After sovereignty was formally transferred, the emerging Iraqi government remained fragile, lacking broad public support and struggling to perform essential governmental functions within a deeply fragmented society divided along ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian lines. As a result, effective governance capable of ensuring security and delivering services failed to materialize (4, 10).

Good governance requires an inclusive national state capable of providing security, delivering public services, and fostering mutual trust between citizens and governing institutions—conditions that remained largely absent in Iraq. Social capital and public trust are essential for stabilizing political order and sustaining cooperation between state and society. Where such trust is weak, both government and society become increasingly fragile, creating conditions conducive to violence and civil conflict. In Iraq, deep ethnic and sectarian divisions, along with a persistent gap between state and society, weakened social capital and prevented resolution of identity crises following occupation. The failure to cultivate national cohesion and inclusive governance left the central government constrained by oligarchic ethnic and sectarian structures. Consequently, the fragility of the Iraqi state created a favorable environment for the emergence and expansion of ISIS activities (3, 4).

Conclusion

The terrorist organization ISIS, grounded in its Salafi ideological framework, has targeted both Shiite communities and, in many instances, Sunni Muslims whose interpretations of Islam differ from its doctrinal outlook. Within this ideological construct, any defense of Shiite or Sunni intellectual traditions opposing ISIS ideology is interpreted as

resistance against the organization itself. Consequently, confrontation with the Shiite-led government of Iraq constituted the group's initial strategic objective, followed by broader regional ambitions centered particularly on countering states perceived to be aligned with Iran. ISIS has pursued a strategy aimed at prolonging sectarian conflict between Shiites and Sunnis, viewing a war of attrition as a mechanism for expanding influence and destabilizing existing political orders.

In March 2013, ISIS established control over the city of Raqqa, marking the first provincial capital to fall under rebel authority. In January 2014, capitalizing on tensions between Iraq's Sunni minority and the Shiite-led central government, the group seized the predominantly Sunni city of Fallujah in Iraq's western Anbar province. Subsequently, ISIS expanded its territorial reach by capturing significant portions of Ramadi, the provincial capital, as well as areas in northeastern Iraq near the borders with Turkey and Syria. The organization's military campaign reached a decisive moment in June 2014 when it captured Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, thereby extending hostilities toward Samarra, Baqubah, and Jalawla and dramatically reshaping the regional security landscape.

Existing structural divisions within Iraq—particularly ethnic cleavages between Kurdish and Arab populations and sectarian divisions between Shiites and Sunnis—created fertile conditions for crisis expansion during an already sensitive electoral environment. These fractures were further intensified by socioeconomic disparities, poverty, and limited cultural development in Sunni tribal regions of eastern Iraq, compounded by perceptions of governmental neglect. Such circumstances enabled ISIS to mobilize tribal youth, organize militant networks, and institutionalize extremist Takfiri doctrines within local communities. The group's anti-Shiite orientation and escalation of violent and inhumane terrorist operations against government supporters and civilians facilitated cooperation between ISIS militants and remnants of Iraq's Baath Party seeking retribution against the post-Saddam political order. This alliance contributed to the militarization of political grievances and pushed Iraq deeper into political and social crisis.

Simultaneously, ISIS expanded recruitment efforts by exploiting growing Sunni dissatisfaction with the central government. Through attacks on Iraqi military installations and barracks in Nineveh and Salah al-Din provinces—many of which collapsed without significant resistance—the organization substantially strengthened its military capacity. Available information suggests that the organization's fighters consisted of several distinct categories of recruits, collectively estimated at approximately ten thousand members during its early expansion phase. After consolidating forces in Sunni-majority areas, ISIS appointed local emirs to administer captured cities and relied heavily on military equipment seized from Iraqi army bases, particularly following the fall of Mosul.

The rapid growth of ISIS manpower enabled further territorial expansion across Sunni tribal regions. In several areas, Iraqi military units withdrew or surrendered equipment without sustained confrontation. This phenomenon can partly be understood through local sociopolitical dynamics, as many soldiers stationed in Sunni regions shared communal affiliations with local populations and were confronted with a movement claiming to restore an Islamic political order rooted in early Sunni historical models. Reports indicating the execution of captured soldiers largely suggest that victims were predominantly Shiite personnel, reinforcing the sectarian dimension of the conflict.

Politically, ISIS articulated a broader regional strategy aimed at redefining the geopolitical order of neighboring states. The organization envisioned three sequential objectives: first, gaining support among Syrian Sunnis and overthrowing the Syrian government through the unification of Sunni populations in Iraq and the Levant; second, toppling the secular political system in Jordan; and third, confronting Iran as the perceived center of Shiite political power. Although ISIS initially prioritized regime change in Syria, internal rivalries among opposition groups and the

organization's exclusivist policies led to strategic setbacks, forcing a partial operational refocus toward Iraq while maintaining the ideological commitment to establishing an Islamic caliphate uniting Iraq and Syria.

In its strategic vision regarding Jordan, ISIS portrayed the Jordanian state as illegitimate due to its secular orientation and perceived accommodation toward Israel, advocating the installation of an ISIS-appointed emir in the territory. The organization's third strategic objective involved confronting Iran, which ISIS regarded as the principal stronghold of Shiism. Drawing symbolic inspiration from historical Umayyad and Abbasid models of governance, ISIS framed Iran as territory that should ultimately fall under a revived caliphate. Consistent with earlier Al-Qaeda practices, ISIS declared Shiite populations legitimate targets, seeking to expand conflict eastward toward Iranian borders through prolonged asymmetric warfare and terrorist operations.

ISIS's perception of Shiite communities reveals a strategic emphasis on targeting what it considers the ideological core opposing its proclaimed Islamic state. From this perspective, Iran represents the central obstacle to the establishment of the caliphate envisioned by ISIS leadership. Attacks on Shiite holy sites and communities in Iraq were therefore interpreted as preparatory stages for broader regional confrontation. A significant component of the organization's long-term operational scenario involved extending battlefronts toward Iran's borders, thereby transforming localized insurgency into a wider transnational conflict intended to reshape regional power balances.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

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Transparency of Data

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