

# Islam Watch

## State of Confusion

### ISIS' Strategy and How to Counter It

By William McCants

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In 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, deputy head of al Qaeda, had a killer idea: the al Qaeda franchise in Iraq (AQI) should declare an Islamic state. In a letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the brutal leader of AQI, Zawahiri explained how it would work. The Islamic state, he wrote, would fill security vacuums around Iraq left by departing American forces. Once the Islamic state successfully fended off the attacks from neighboring countries that would undoubtedly follow, it could proclaim the reestablishment of the caliphate, the one-man institution that had ruled a vast empire in early Islamic history. For the scheme to succeed, Zawahiri warned Zarqawi, al Qaeda had to make sure that the Sunni masses supported the project.

Once it was loosed into the world, Zawahiri's idea was too powerful for him or the al Qaeda leadership to control. By 2006, long before the American withdrawal and far too early to have built up much popular backing, AQI had established Zawahiri's Islamic state. The new head of AQI after Zarqawi's death, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, dissolved his organization and pledged his allegiance to a new "commander of the faithful," Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who purportedly controlled the Dawlat al Iraq al Islamiyya, or the Islamic State.

Baghdadi's title confused the jihadist community. In medieval Islam, "commander of the faithful" was usually reserved for the caliphs. Was Baghdadi claiming to be the caliph? And what of Mullah Omar, to whom al Qaeda's leaders had already pledged allegiance? The name of the group was also puzzling. The word for "state" in Arabic is *dawla*. Was the new group claiming to be a *dawla* in the modern sense, an institution jihadists believe is un-Islamic? Or was the Dawlat al Iraq al Islamiyya simply an ode to the name of the man revered as the greatest caliphate, the Dawla Abbasiyya?

The Islamic State was not eager to dispel the ambiguity. It either liked implying that it had more power than it actually possessed or believed that the jihadist community was not ready to tolerate the full freight of its claims. Ambiguous audacity captured the imagination and was thus the key to the group's power.