

HOW DOES ISIS MAINTAIN CONTROL OF LARGE URBAN AREAS?

By Charles C. Caris

PREPARATION: ISIS was setting the conditions for uncontested rule of Raqqa since the summer of 2013, when it detonated VBIEDs against rebel headquarters, kidnapped rebel commanders, and detained civilian activists. In Mosul, ISIS undermined government institutions with large scale racketeering operations and carried out targeted assassinations against key civilian and military leaders. By the time ISIS took full military control of Raqqa in January 2014 and Mosul in June 2014, an organized opposition to ISIS did not exist.

SYNCHRONIZATION: Through the integration of military and political campaigns, particularly in the provincial capital of Raqqa, ISIS has built a holistic system of governance that includes religious, educational, judicial, security, humanitarian, and infrastructure projects, among others. ISIS is currently working to build this structure in Mosul. As ISIS seized Mosul, the group's top hospital administrator in Raqqa was reportedly sent to a hospital in Mosul. This shows ISIS would like to export its governance systems in Syria to Iraq.

COERCION: ISIS has allowed local employees to keep their jobs, while appointing loyal foreign fighters to top management positions. This enables ISIS to undertake large governance projects and project control over the local population with only a limited number of personnel. By maintaining large detention facilities in Raqqa and Mosul, ISIS has been able to neutralize potential opposition. ISIS has routinely carried out extra-judicial punishments of civilians, including public executions, has conducted mass executions of captured enemy personnel, and has waged assassination campaigns against influential security officials. Finally, ISIS conducts psychological operations and exercises nearly complete control over the flow of information, enabling it to broadcast messages of dominance. This acts as a force multiplier for ISIS, because the local population may believe ISIS has more control than it actually does. As part of its information dominance, ISIS collects intelligence on civilians under its control by registering the names and ID numbers of local residents.

STABILITY: Courts, schools, police stations, infrastructure repair offices, bakeries, and humanitarian aid centers that ISIS administers provide stability to previously chaotic regions, especially in Syria. These governance structures are not universally opposed by the population. Local residents interviewed in both Raqqa and Mosul have expressed a grudging respect for ISIS governance projects, if not its methods for ensuring obedience. As part of ISIS's efforts, it has also offered salaries for some of its new employees in Raqqa and Mosul. This has an effect in Mosul especially because the Iraqi government had stopped paying its Mosul-based municipal employees in June 2014.

EFFICIENCY: ISIS utilizes a sophisticated record-keeping system. This allows for effective allocation of resources and portrays to the population a sense of order. Documents provided by ISIS's religious police in Raqqa show the meticulous documentation of more than 470 religious offenses over a one month period. The offenses, such as failing to arrive on time for prayer, are collated by type of offense, represented graphically, and sent to provincial leadership on a weekly basis.

These measures do not preclude local resistance to ISIS in or outside of urban centers. They explain why the populations in Raqqa, Mosul, and other cities may be disinclined to resist ISIS. Other factors may include extreme distrust of state security in Syria and Iraq, as well as lack of an alternative. Creating alternatives that provide hope for personal safety and sustainment of the populations under ISIS rule may reverse this trend.