IHS Jane’s Terrorism Special Report

One year on: The expansion of the Islamic State’s caliphate

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On 29 June 2014, chief Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released an audio statement, marking the beginning of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, in which he announced the re-establishment of the khilafa, or caliphate. He proclaimed the group’s emir, Ibrahim al-Badri (alias Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), as khalifa, or caliph, and stated that it was an incumbent duty on all Sunni jihadist groups to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi and the Islamic State – as ISIL was now to be called.

Over the following 12 months, a plethora of jihadist groups across the Middle East and North Africa, as well as South and Southeast Asia, pledged allegiance to Baghdadi and the Islamic State, although the group has proven selective in the pledges that it has accepted and the locations that it has constituted as a wilaya (province) of the Islamic State. Beyond Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State has formally announced the establishment of wilayaat (provinces) in the following countries: Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Nigeria is not included, as although the Boko Haram pledge of allegiance was accepted, the formation of Wilayat Gharb Afriqa (West Africa Province) – as Boko Haram has seemingly renamed itself – has not been formally proclaimed by the Islamic State leadership as with other wilayaat. Similarly the four wilayaat announced in Russia’s North Caucasus in late June came too late to be integrated into this report.

The model for announcing a wilaya appears to follow one of three routes. If a group already exists and is active in territory, and then has a pledge of allegiance accepted, then a wilaya is established in its area of operations. An example is Egypt’s Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis being constituted as Wilayat Sinai. The second route is for a wilaya to be named for a whole country, which is then supplanted with individual wilayaat as local units become operationally active, such as in Yemen where the initially announced Wilayat Yemen has been superseded by at least eight localised wilyaat in governorates across the country. Finally, the Islamic State may send militants and delegates to a country, whereby they attempt to absorb pre-existing jihadist groups and establish an operational presence before publicly declaring allegiance and announcing a wilaya, as was the case in Libya.
In the 12 months since the initial khilafa announcement, the Islamic State has created 18 wilayaat across Iraq and Syria, although this has been an evolutionary process. As the group has both expanded and faced setbacks across both countries, new wilayaat have been created and existing wilayaat disbanded depending on the group's local presence and strength. For instance, the wilayaat in Syria's Latakia and Idlib were seemingly disbanded following heavy fighting with rival Islamists, while in Iraq new wilayaat have been created through sub-divisions of existing wilayaat, such as the creation of Wilayat al-Furat, a cross-border wilaya comprising territory from Iraq's Anbar and Syria's Deir ez Zour.

The khilafa announcement was the culmination of the Islamic State's successful territorial offensives in east and northeast Syria since mid-2013 and the west and northwest of Iraq since the beginning of the 2014 offensives that left the group in control of key urban centres, particularly in Iraq, where the group had secured control of Falluja, Mosul, and Tikrit among others. The offensive successes enjoyed by the Islamic State, and the multiple instances of mass killings that followed, precipitated an international response, with two separate US-led coalitions engaging in airstrikes against the group in Iraq and Syria.

Despite the intensive counter-terrorism pressure brought to bear against the Islamic State, the group has managed to largely preserve the territorial gains it made and expand further. With the exception of the loss of Tikrit and Kurdish-dominated areas of northern Iraq and northern Syria, the group has maintained control of the cities of Raqqa, Mosul, and Falluja, and expanded further over the 12 months, taking Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria in May 2015, alongside a host of smaller consolidated territorial gains.

At the same time, the Islamic State has maintained a high-tempo of insurgent operations in key urban centres that remain under state control, principally in Iraq where Baghdad has suffered a near daily toll of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) and suicide attacks.

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The Islamic State formally announced the establishment of Wilayat Yemen in an audio statement released by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 13 November 2014, and called for the “nullification of all groups therein” pending their pledge of allegiance. The announcement represented a clear challenge to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and was followed by statements denigrating AQAP for failing to sufficiently oppose Zaidi Shia militant group Ansar Allah, which took control of the capital Sanaa in September.

After the announcement of the wilaya, a series of small Islamic State cells operating across the country emerged, with the larger Wilayat Yemen replaced by smaller governorate-level wilayaats. The most notable of these was Wilayat Sanaa, operating in the capital, which took responsibility for the first attack in the country that could definitively be attributed to the Islamic State. Four suicide bombers attacked two mosques popular with Ansar Allah members and supporters in Sanaa on 3 March, killing at least seven people. AQAP was unequivocal in its denial of involvement, citing an injunction by the group’s leadership against attacking places of worship. This was followed by Wilayat Sanaa’s claim of responsibility, underlining the first major Islamic State operation in Yemen.

Since then, Islamic State militants have been active in wilayaats across Yemen, including Aden, Lahij, Al-Bayda, Shabwa, Ataq (a city in Shabwa), and Hadhramaut, in addition to Wilayat Liwa al-Akhdar, which covers Ibb and Taiz governorates. These wilayaats have claimed responsibility for a series of low-level attacks targeting Ansar Allah militants, but the attacks were frequently either claimed by, or attributed to, AQAP and it was not possible to independently verify the Islamic State claims. Separately, while Wilayat Ataq released a video on 1 May showing the beheading of 15 captured Yemeni soldiers in Shabwa, the date of the incident could not be definitively established.

Wilayat Sanaa launched further mass-casualty attacks against Ansar Allah in the capital on 17 and 20 June, leaving at least six people dead.
The Islamic State formally announced the establishment of Wilayat Sinai, comprising the governorates of North Sinai and South Sinai in Egypt, in an audio statement released by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 13 November 2014. The announcement came several days after the primary militant Islamist group operating in North Sinai, Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, and Baghdadi’s announcement saw Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis established as the Wilayat Sinai of the Islamic State.

Prior to the pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State there had been multiple indications that Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis was taking inspiration and direct instruction from the operational methods of the Islamic State’s predecessor, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This was most noticeable in the evolution of the group’s operations across 2013 and 2014 from low-level improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on energy infrastructure to the launching of notable suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attacks in North Sinai, as well as in the capital Cairo.

There was a clear shift in the operational capability and targeting parameters employed by the group, which culminated in the pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State and the formation of Wilayat Sinai. This announcement, however, precipitated the launch of a major counter-terrorism offensive in North Sinai by the Egyptian military, putting Wilayat Sinai under significant pressure and reducing both its manpower and operational space. As a consequence, the group’s operations over the following eight months have been typified by comparatively low-level IED and small-arms operations in North Sinai, principally targeting security force personnel. Nonetheless, several high-profile attacks through early 2015 have underlined that Wilayat Sinai’s operational capabilities and threat posed remain undiminished.

Additionally, although Wilayat Sinai remains under pressure, there remains the possibility that the group could develop strong operational links with Islamic State militants in neighbouring countries, particularly Libya.
The Islamic State formally announced its presence in Libya in an audio statement released by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 13 November 2014, leading to the establishment of three wilayaat that divide the country into its historical regions. Wilayat Barqa represents Cyrenaica region in the east; Wilayat Tarabulus represents Tripolitania region in the northwest; and Wilayat Fezzan represents Fezzan region in the southwest.

The formation of the Libyan wilayaat was directed by the Islamic State leadership. Following the 2011 uprising against Muammar Ghadaffi, a contingent of Libyan nationals travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight alongside ISIL. These fighters formed a unit known as Katibat al-Battar, and in early 2014 members were directed to return to Libya and establish an operational presence. A key early operational hub for these fighters was the eastern city of Derna, where they formed the Shura Council of Islamic Youth. In October, these fighters formally pledged allegiance to the Islamic State; the pledge was accepted and Wilayat Barqa was founded the following month. Wilayat Tarabulus followed in December and Wilayat Fezzan in January.

The Islamic State has taken full advantage of the power vacuum in Libya caused by the ongoing conflict between the Islamist government in Tripoli and the rival internationally-recognised government in Bayda, attacking both in order to seize control of territory and strategic facilities. Wilayat Barqa has engaged in heavy fighting with both Islamist militias and the Libyan National Army in Benghazi and nearby locales, notably killing at least 45 people in a triple suicide attack near Derna on 20 February.

In the west, Wilayat Tarabulus has targeted foreign nationals and facilities, including embassies and hotels – notably the Corinthia Hotel on 27 January – and has also expanded and seized territory in the region, including the city of Sirte. The wilayaat have also engaged in two notable massacres, executing 28 Ethiopian Christians in two locations in the country in mid-April and beheading 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians near Tripoli in early February.
The Islamic State formally announced the establishment of a wilaya in Saudi Arabia in an audio statement released by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 13 November 2014. The announcement was perhaps surprising given the seeming absence of a verified Islamic State operational presence in the country, with the announced wilaya – Wilayat al-Haramayn – comprising the entire country.

Per the group’s messaging Wilayat al-Haramayn was seemingly supplanted several months later by Wilayat Najd, which claimed responsibility for the Islamic State’s currently most notable attacks in the country. The first occurred on 22 May when a suicide bomber detonated his explosives inside a Shia Muslim mosque during Friday prayers in the Qatif governorate of Eastern province, killing 21 people and wounding a further 80. One week later, on 29 May, a suicide bomber attempted to enter a mosque in Dammam, capital of Eastern, but was prevented by local self-protection units, leading the bomber to detonate outside the mosque and kill four people. The attacks were purposefully designed by the Islamic State to fulfil two key objectives. Firstly to stir up sectarian tension in Saudi Arabia through such deliberately provocative attacks on the Shia minority and secondly to challenge and undermine the Sunni Salafist credentials of the ruling Al-Saud family by forcing it into a position where it is compelled to protect and provide security for the Shia population.

While the bombings were the first official Wilayat Najd operations, earlier on 5 January four militants were intercepted by security forces near Arar in Northern Borders province as they crossed the border from Iraq. In a subsequent exchange of fire, two of the militants were shot dead while the other two detonated explosive belts, killing three border guards – including local commander Brigadier General Oudah al-Balawi. Authorities attributed the attack to the Islamic State.
The Islamic State formally announced the establishment of Wilayat al-Jazair in Algeria in an audio statement released by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 13 November 2014. The wilaya covers the entirety of Algeria, perhaps counter-intuitively reflecting the relative lack of operational presence and activity by Islamic State militants in the country. Indeed, the only recognised Islamic State affiliate group in the country is Jund al-Khilafa fi Ard al-Jazaair, a splinter faction of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which broke with its parent organisation and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State on 13 September.

A little over a week later, on 21 September, the group kidnapped French national Hervé Gourdel as he travelled in the Kabylie mountains in the north of the country. In a video released the following day, Jund al-Khalifa threatened to execute the hostage within 24 hours if the French government did not end its participation in operations against the Islamic State in Iraq as part of the US-led coalition. Following the passing of the deadline, the group released a video statement showing the decapitation of Gourdel.

The only other recorded attack claimed by, or attributed to, Jund al-Khalifa over the following months was an ambush targeting a convoy of Chinese and Turkish nationals working on a rail construction project, which was repelled by police without any casualties in Bouira province on 3 November. While several further low-level attacks were claimed in March and April, the claims could not be independently verified.

Ten days after this attack, the formation of Wilayat al-Jazair was announced, and while the group's operational tempo remained low over the following months this was probably partly attributable to intensifying counter-terrorism efforts by the Algerian authorities. In particular, Jund al-Khilafa's emir, Abdelmalek Gouri (alias Khaled Abou Slimane), was killed in a counter-terrorism operation in Boumerdes province on 22 December, while another operation in the province on 19 May left at least 19 suspected members of the group dead.
The Islamic State announced the formation of Wilayat Khorasan, covering both Afghanistan and Pakistan, in an audio statement by chief spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani on 26 January. The wilaya was the first established outside the Middle East and North Africa, and represented a direct challenge to Al-Qaeda and its newest affiliate – Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).

As with the Libyan wilaya, the roots of Wilaya Khorasan lie in the Islamic State sending back to Pakistan and Afghanistan militants from regional militant Islamist groups such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who had travelled to Syria to fight alongside ISIL. In August 2014, a group of eight dissident local TTP commanders in Pakistan announced the formation of Tehrik-e-Khilafa and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and Baghdadi.

The pledge of allegiance went unanswered for several months, seemingly as the Islamic State’s influence spread into Afghanistan, where dissident Taliban commanders joined the leaders of Tehrik-e-Khilafa. In early January, a combined group of TTP and Taliban commanders pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, naming former TTP commander Hafiz Sayed Khan as leader and former Taliban commander Abdur Rauf Khaadim as his deputy. This pledge of allegiance was then accepted by Adnani at the end of the month and Wilayat Khorasan established. However, the wilaya suffered early setbacks, with Rauf killed in a US missile strike in Afghanistan’s Helmand province on 9 February and Khan killed in the premature detonation of an IED in Khyber Agency in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) on 16 April.

Despite these setbacks, Wilayat Khorasan has launched several low-level operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan since its formation, typified by IED or small-arms attacks. Afghan officials also attributed two separate suicide attacks in Jalalabad on 18 April, leaving 35 people dead, to Wilayat Khorasan. Additionally, Wilayat Khorasan militants have clashed with Taliban militaries, particularly in Nangarhar, raising the prospect of future violent competition.