

ISIS ANNUAL REPORTS REVEAL A METRICS-DRIVEN MILITARY COMMAND

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has a disciplined military command that reports attacks across operating areas that has operated in this manner for at least two years. This structure allows the organized collecting of statistics that have been published in two consecutive “annual reports” detailing “progress” by ISIS in its Iraqi military campaign.
- ISIS’s progress in its campaign to control territory in Iraq is visible in its reported statistics, with shifts in Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) from armed assaults to more selective assassinations/targeting killings and IEDs. The destruction of houses, establishment of checkpoints, and claims to control cities speak directly to control of territory – including in provinces outside of Anbar.
- Shifts in TTPs reflect this progress; they also reflect a careful consideration of the environment in different operating areas – not only physical environment (urban versus rural), but also by adversary (ISF, Sahwa, or Ansar al-Islam).
- Although news reporting tends to focus on high profile activity by ISIS in Anbar, such as the capture of Fallujah, statistics presented in these reports identify a particular focus of activity by ISIS on Ninewa, indicating a designated main effort.
- Statistics presented in these reports serve to confirm of previous ISW assessments of a phased campaign design by ISIS. Not only on a tactical level, but also operationally, ISIS is working to wrest control of Iraq from the ISF. The change in TTPs from armed attacks; to targeted killings and attacks; to demolition of houses, checkpoints, and control of cities; and possibly from there to Shari’a law and governance, resembles the “Clear, Hold, Build” strategy of classic insurgency literature.
- This observation of ISIS as an insurgency in Iraq combines with the observation that they are functioning as a military rather than as a terrorist network. A counter-terrorism strategy that does not take these characteristics into consideration will under-estimate and fail to defeat this enemy.

On March 31, 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) published a new edition of “*al-Naba*” [The Report], its “annual report” covering the period of November 2012 to November 2013. The Arabic language report, over 400 pages long, was first published by the I’tisaam Media Foundation, ISIS’s main media arm, and then re-posted online by secondary sources.¹ This report is the second known ISIS report publicizing the results of their military campaign in Iraq. In August 2013, ISIS published a similar report covering the period of November 2011 – November 2012.² This report was posted to the al-Shumukh jihadist forum, one of al-Qaeda’s primary information outlets.³ Although the covers of the report refer to them as the “fifth” and “fourth” years, respectively, no previous editions appear to be available online. Possibly these years refer to an organizational milestone, rather than a first edition, given that the quantity of military operations between 2009 – 2011 was not as significant. The repeated publication

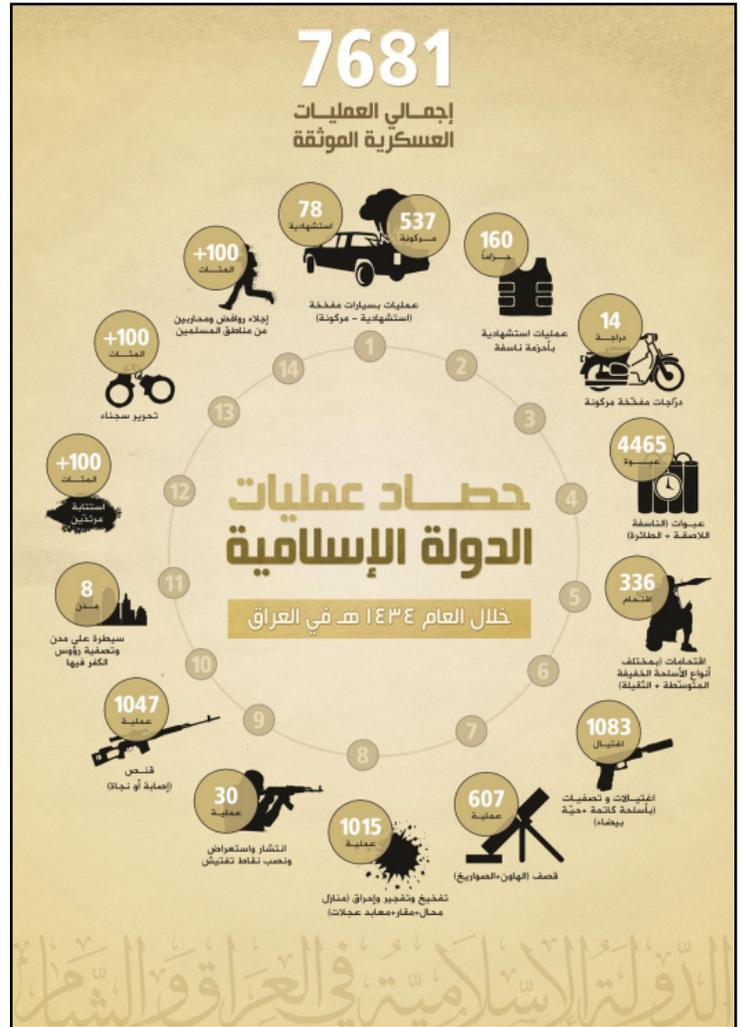
of consecutive annual reports indicates that the ISIS military command in Iraq has exercised command and control over a national theater since at least early 2012. ISIS in Iraq is willing and able to organize centralized reporting procedures and to publish the results of its performance to achieve organizational effects. Such organizational effects might include attracting the attention of potential donors to ISIS’s cause and also showing off an increasingly structured organization capable of more than just attacking haphazardly.

There are many reasons why a military organization would collect and publish attack metrics. First, metrics effectively demonstrate the use of centrally distributed resources, such as suicide bombers. Second, metrics provide a higher command with a means to compare subordinate commands and to control main efforts. Third, attack metrics provide a means to communicate organizational efficacy to outside parties, such as

donors, al-Qaeda groups, and adversaries. While the contents of the annual report are more significant as a message than as a measurement of actual attacks, it is important to understand what ISIS is reporting about its own performance in order to understand its own narrative about the war in Iraq.

This essay will examine the statistics provided by ISIS in its two consecutive annual reports. Where possible, this report will compare the attack statistics reported by ISIS to other sources of information, such as local news and previous ISW assessments. This verification will not be possible in every instance; therefore, this report will not attempt a full quantitative or content analysis. Rather, this report is a preliminary summary in order to point out that ISIS is claiming credit for significant battlefield effects, including some that are not readily observable in open source reporting. In particular, ISIS describes its campaign for Ninewa as a main effort, which is only incidentally apparent from local news because ISIS has silenced journalists in that area through intimidation since January 2014.⁴

It is important to remember that the number of attacks reported by ISIS may be exaggerated or irregularly reported; for example, it is unclear from their reported numbers how ISIS categorizes complex attacks that include more than one attack type (a raid of a building preceded by a suicide vest attack, for example). A more intensive analysis of the Arabic report content may identify monthly trends and other significant insights into how ISIS interprets data. ISIS reporting about its campaign in Ninewa makes these documents an important resource. Further analysis may also explain how ISIS in Iraq conceptualizes phased operations; how operations are resourced; and how subordinate commands operate.



Infographic detailing total attack numbers by type (1434 H/2013)

ANNUAL REPORT ORGANIZATION

Before turning to an analysis of ISIS-reported statistics, it is important first to examine how the annual reports are organized. The annual reports both contain two important features. First, they are organized by attack type. The attack types include:

- Assassination
- Armed attack⁵
- Bombing (Mortars, Grenade launchers, and Rockets)
- Bombing and burning houses (HBIEDs)
- Prisoners freed
- Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (SVBIEDs)
- Suicide vests (SVESTs)
- Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs)

- Motorcycle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (MCBIEDs)
- Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)
- Knife attacks
- Targeted attacks
- Sniping
- Apostates repented
- Cities taken over
- Apostates run over
- Checkpoints set up
- Rafidha expelled

Several aspects of this ontology are worth noting. First, it separates SVBIEDs from VBIEDs, designating suicide operations as special and distinct from “regular” VBIEDs. The majority of suicide bombers in Iraq have historically been foreign fighters.⁶ This division therefore suggests ISIS leadership intended to highlight the effective use of foreign fighters and where in Iraq ISIS is claiming to weight them. ISIS also highlights targeted killings and assassinations regardless of weapon type used, which suggests a distinction between measures of performance and measures of effectiveness. As observed through other sources, ISIS also took particular note of HBIEDs, which ISW assessed as part of a broader intimidation campaign against ISF members in 2013.⁷ ISIS also tracks milestone events, such as prisoner escapes, establishment of checkpoints, and the overrun of cities among its metrics for every sub-unit. These categories affirm ISIS’s intent to establish military control of territory in Iraq.

The category of “Apostates repented” suggests that ISIS intends to achieve influence among the Sahwa (the Sunni Awakening movement against al-Qaeda) and the Iraqi Police, an alternative to kinetic solutions and a measure of strategic success. Additionally, the category of “Rafidha expelled” confirms ISIS’s intent to displace Shi’a from areas it means to control. This category was added in the 2013 annual report, and was not present in the report covering 2012. It corresponds with the population displacement in portions of Iraq outside of Anbar that ISW has observed over the 2013 time period.⁸ The categories of “Cities taken over” and “Checkpoints set up” speak to control of urban territory in Iraq to which ISIS aspires.

The annual reports are also organized by operating area. According to the annual reports, ISIS designated the following operating areas, covering November 2011 – November 2012, carrying them into the following year:

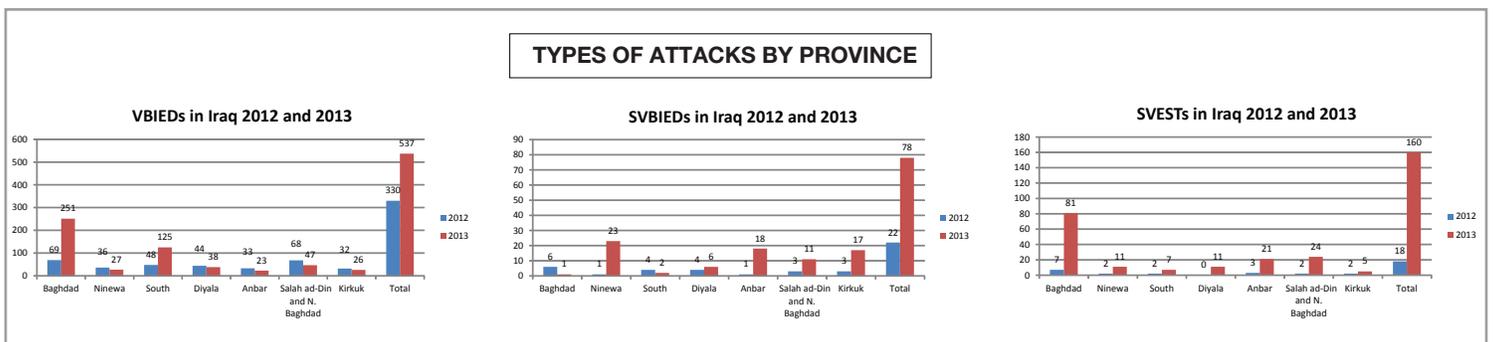
- Baghdad
- Ninewa
- South
- Diyala

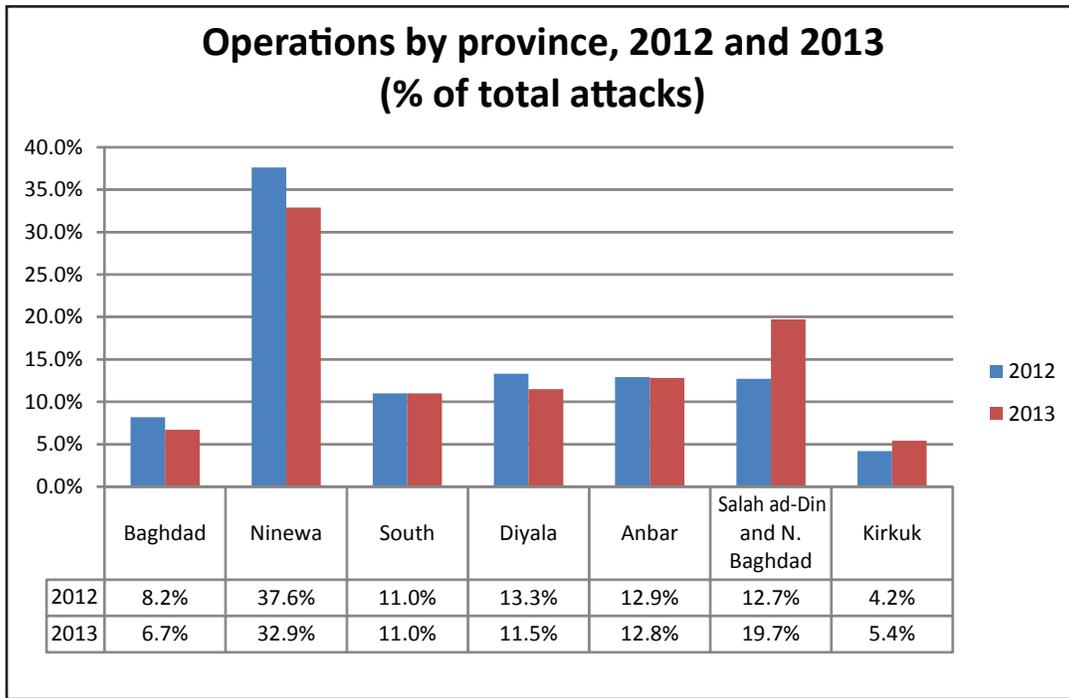
- Anbar
- Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad
- Kirkuk

The 2012 annual report predates the creation of Twitter pages designating Wilayats, or local governorate structures, which bear the same names.⁹ Since November 2013, Twitter pages have emerged for each of the ISIS Wilayats, including a new Wilayat of Baghdad as of February 24, 2014.¹⁰ This sequence sheds light on the enduring relationships between the contemporary ISIS military command, operating for two years, and the recently nominally reconstituted governance structures. This sequence suggests that the ISIS military organization is preeminent within the overall organization in Iraq. The ISIS Wilayat Twitter pages in Iraq mostly post evidence of violent attacks, which supports this idea. This contrasts with the narrative contained in many of the ISIS Wilayat Twitter pages in Syria, which focus more on education, Shari’a law, and reconstruction, especially in ar-Raqqa, which ISIS declared to be the beginning of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.¹¹ The command and control displayed by the ISIS annual reports specifically showcases a military organizational structure, with tactical units reporting attack statistics to a central command.

It is also important to note that the operating areas listed for both years are consistent. This fact suggests that, from its resurgence through to 2014, ISIS has possessed a reporting structure for subordinate units in the full range of operating areas. This does not necessarily mean that their operating areas or command and control boundaries were consistent across the two years, but is an indicator that units were arrayed and reporting from a geographically dispersed footprint. This interpretation must be explored with caution, as the geographic division of attack metrics may be part of a specific ISIS messaging strategy. Regardless, it is in itself an important observation of ISIS’s reporting methods. Both of the annual reports are further subdivided by month, similar to how the Wilayat Twitter pages have begun to report monthly attack metrics.¹²

It is also worth noting that the annual reports group Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad together as one operating area.





ISIS social media activity during the first three months of 2014 indicates that these operating areas are now separate, or at least report to separate Wilayats, as there is one Wilayat Twitter account for Salah ad-Din and another one for Northern Baghdad. These Twitter accounts publish statements that are labeled either “State of Salah ad-Din” or “State of Northern Baghdad.” It is possible that they have recently become separate from each other, which might reflect increased operational activity in this area. It is also possible that the military and governance boundaries do not fully align. Future annual reports may shed light on these organizational issues over time.

These two annual reports primarily cover the lethal operations of ISIS in Iraq. From the period of April 2013 through the present, ISIS has been operating in Syria as well, though the distinctions between their military operations in Iraq and Syria is the subject of ongoing study at ISW. The military command described in the annual reports bears characteristics of a professionalizing army, which we have long observed in ISIS in Iraq but have detected in Syria later, in spring 2014.¹³ The publication of annual reports is a key example. If interpreted directly, similarities among the attack patterns reported by several of the geographic sub-commands in Iraq further indicate that they are operating and reporting in similar ways. This speaks of sustained organizational control, consistent with ISW’s current estimate for the ISIS military organization operating in Iraq.¹⁴

For the purposes of this background, the year 2012¹⁵ will be used to describe the first annual report under examination; and 2013¹⁶ will be used to describe the second, though the hijri years 1433H and 1434H were used in the originals. The data that is presented in this

backgrounder has been extracted from the tables contained in the ISIS annual reports, where it is structured first by operating area, and then by event type. We have gathered the data and compiled it into graphs to make it visually accessible. The data is represented below in the same categories that ISIS applied in its annual reports, which leave room for broad interpretation. Since the event categories used in some cases denote similar event types, e.g. “assassinations” and “targeted attacks,” internal differences within ISIS over how certain attacks are defined and classified may also play a role in the drastic increase and decrease of reported attacks in some cases.

NATIONWIDE STATISTICS

VBIEDs

While the total number of VBIEDs in Iraq reported by ISIS greatly increased from 2012 to 2013, this uptick is not the case in every operating area. ISIS concentrated the increase in VBIEDs in Baghdad and the South. Reported use of VBIEDs decreased in most other provinces. This is consistent with ISW’s observations of the consolidation of the ISIS VBIED campaign in Baghdad from February 2013 to the present day.¹⁷ Reported SVBIED attacks, however, increased in Ninewa, Kirkuk, Anbar, and Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad. Between both the reported VBIED and SVBIED categories, it is clear that the ISIS VBIED campaign increased significantly in volume in 2013, also consistent with ISW’s previous assessments.¹⁸

Suicide Operations

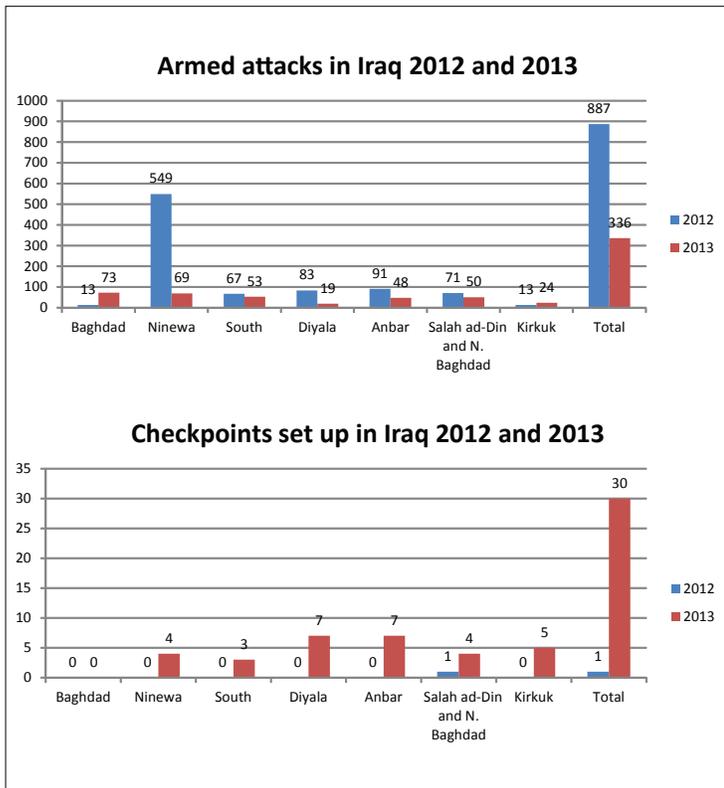
While reported SVBIED attacks were concentrated outside of Baghdad, reported SVEST attacks were concentrated inside Baghdad. In fact, ISIS reported that more suicide bombers were applied to SVEST attacks than to SVBIED attacks, which are more complex. It is curious that ISIS reports that Baghdad had high rates of VBIED attacks and high rates of SVEST attacks, but not SVBIED attacks. This is noteworthy because of the recorded use of both VBIEDs and SVESTs indicates a direct capability to conduct SVBIED attacks; yet that attack type is not being utilized. This may be the result of a change in tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) whereby ISIS focuses on the use of operators wearing suicide vests that allow them to enter a facility with a lower risk of being detected. Attacks on targets such as cafes and restaurants make the use of SVESTs preferable to the SVBIED. The take-away from this trend is that the low occurrence of SVBIEDs in Baghdad is not prompted by a lack of foreign fighters, nor a lack of materiel. This appears to be a deliberate change in tactics to achieve a specific goal. An alternate interpretation might explore the characteristics of the Baghdad VBIED command that set it apart from the rest of the military organization. ISW had previously assessed the VBIED command to be a specialized component of ISIS in its early reconstitution.¹⁹

Armed Attacks

The reported category “armed attack” is difficult to precisely define based on statistics, but the reports describe them as attacks utilizing small and medium arms. Such attacks are generally under-reported in press and media, making it more difficult to correlate ISIS figures to observed attack patterns. Armed attacks were concentrated in Ninewa in 2012. Armed attacks diminished across the board in 2013, which suggests that the reporting category was refined into other categories the second year, or that TTPs became more sophisticated. Armed attacks increased in Baghdad from 2012 to 2013, though, which may suggest an increased ISIS focus on Baghdad in 2013. The reported increase in targeting killings and assassinations may cancel out the reported decrease in armed attacks in most cases. Further analysis of the changing situation on the ground would be required to draw a more granular conclusion about shifting tactics and campaign sequencing.²⁰

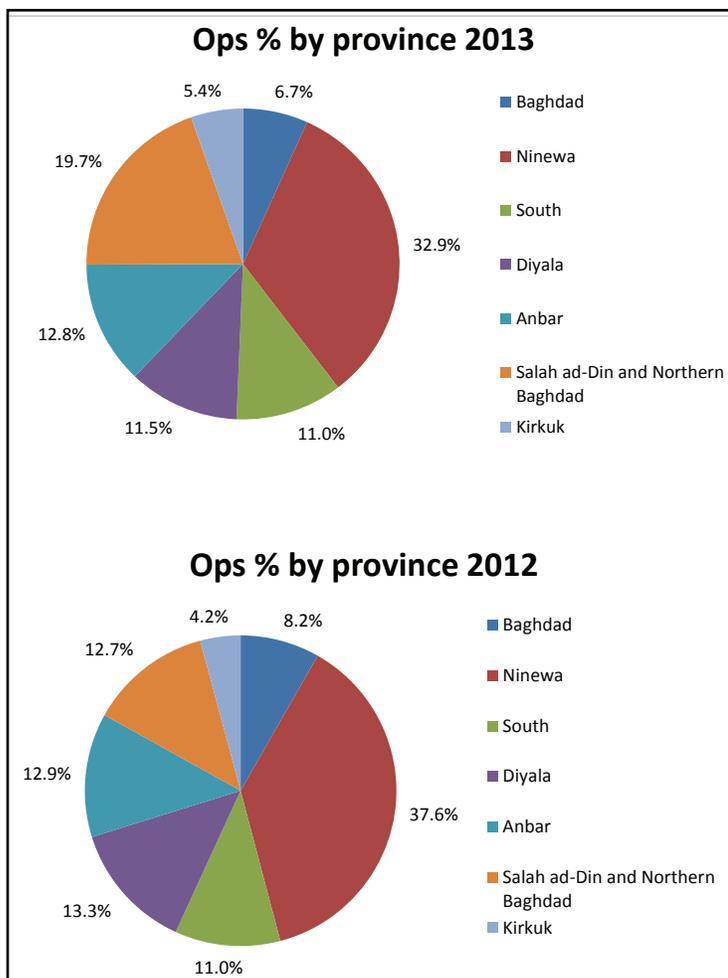
Checkpoints Set Up and Cities Controlled

In 2013, ISIS reported that it controlled eight cities, an increase from the control over one city that it reported the year before. Likewise, the number of checkpoints reported rose from one to 30. These may be inflated statistics, designed to communicate effectiveness at eroding state control. Regardless, they clearly demonstrated the aspiration to control territory in Iraq, which is consistent with ISIS’s observed activity, especially in the Za’ab triangle.²¹ ISIS claimed to control towns in Anbar and Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad in 2013. This reporting period preceded the attack upon Fallujah and Anbar in December 2013, which makes it likely that the report is referencing towns such as Rawa along the upper Euphrates as early control zones for ISIS. Although ISW has previously identified nearby areas as historic areas of support for ISIS, it is important to compare overt indicators of control (checkpoints overrun, for example) to ISIS’s own claimed control over territory in Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad.²²



PROVINCES

A breakdown of the number of attacks in each province as a percentage reveals that ISIS claimed Ninewa as their primary attack zone during 2012 and 2013, with more than 30% of the total attacks during both years. The quantity of attacks may be an artifact of reporting, or a directed message; but the fact that ISIS is portraying Ninewa as its operational focus is clear.



ISIS-reported attacks in Anbar, Diyala, and the South are consistent across both years, as are Baghdad and Kirkuk. The province that saw the most change in reported attacks from 2012 to 2013 was “Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad,” indicating that ISIS saw this local command experiencing the greatest operational increase in 2013.

Ninewa

Ninewa is the province with the highest number of reported operations, according to these two documents. The historic foothold of AQI (before it expanded itself into Syria, becoming ISIS) in Mosul and its surroundings and the legacy of that control zone is likely significant when looking at the attacks that have been conducted there. When coalition forces operations drove AQI out of their former sanctuaries in Anbar, Diyala, and the Baghdad belts in 2008, AQI was forced to relocate to the north. After the military defeat of AQI in Mosul, their footprint was spread out across central and northern Iraq, using the areas in the vicinity of the city as support zones during their reconstitution. According

to previous ISW reporting, coalition forces assessed Mosul to be AQI’s geographic center of gravity.²³ Despite the lack of reporting on Mosul and Ninewa provinces in general, ISW still assesses these provinces to be very important to ISIS; an assessment borne out by activity reported in these publications.

One indicator of ISIS influence in Ninewa is the difference in number of VBIEDs counted between Ninewa and Baghdad during this time period. In 2013, ISIS reported 27 VBIEDs in Ninewa as compared to 251 in Baghdad. This points to ISIS maintaining sufficient influence in the area, likely through coercion, that its leaders do not need to conduct as many attacks involving VBIEDs. Targeted attacks, assassinations, and HBIEDs reportedly increased in Ninewa in 2013, consistent with ISW assessments of the activity south of Mosul in the Za’ab area. The increase in IED attacks is consistent with the estimated overall increase in ISIS operational capability.

Another type of attack that saw a drastic rise in Ninewa as well as the other provinces during 2013 was HBIEDs. ISW reported on the bombing of houses, assessing that ISIS was using the HBIEDs to weaken the ISF by directly threatening its members.²⁴ During the ISIS’s Soldier’s Harvest campaign, announced on July 29, 2013, HBIEDs played a part in the targeting of the ISF in Ninewa province. ISIS used HBIEDs in Shirqat, Qayara, and Shura villages south of Mosul, an indicator of their established control in the area.²⁵ Within the broader context provided by cross-regional reporting, it would seem that the increased use of HBIEDs fits into a larger scheme of weakening the ISF: destroying the homes of ISF members, displacing them, and perhaps incentivizing troops to desert the force through intimidation.

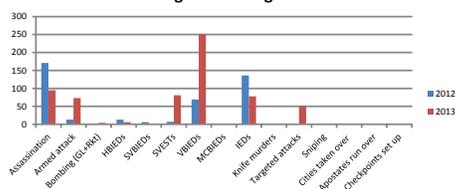
A number of checkpoints were also set up by ISIS in Ninewa during 2013. The mere existence of these checkpoints shows an increased ability to control the area and the inability of the ISF to maintain enough presence in the vulnerable areas of the province to prevent them from being established. Despite ISIS’s effort to isolate Mosul by targeting journalists, some insight into the attack patterns in the city is available. ISIS undertook an extensive campaign of targeting government representatives during Fall 2013, and, together with the HBIED campaign, appeared to be effective in undermining the ISF and intimidating the local population.²⁶

South

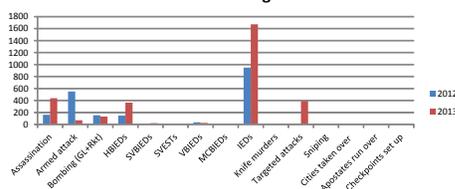
The ISIS Wilayat of the South is assessed to encompass areas of the southern Baghdad Belts including northern Babel province.

ATTACKS BY PROVINCE

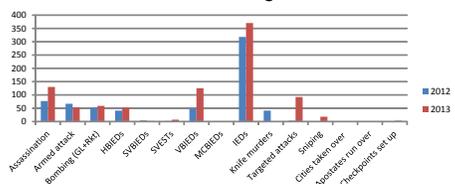
Attacks in Baghdad during 2012 and 2013



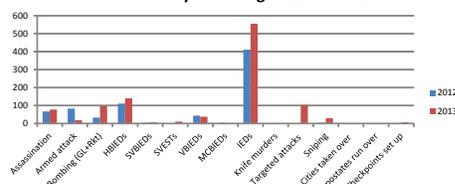
Attacks in Ninewa during 2012 and 2013



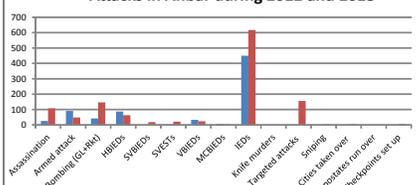
Attacks in the South during 2012 and 2013



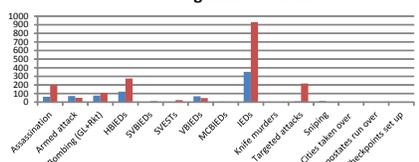
Attacks in Diyala during 2012 and 2013



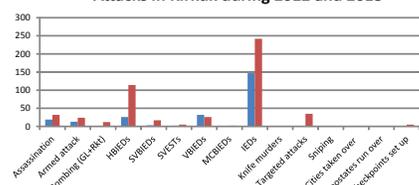
Attacks in Anbar during 2012 and 2013



Attacks in Salahuddin and Northern Baghdad during 2012 and 2013



Attacks in Kirkuk during 2012 and 2013



ISW has been observing ISIS activity in Jurf al-Sakhar and Yusufiyah, and AQI historically maintained support zones in Mahmudiya, Iskandariya, and Arab Jabour where ISIS may seek to reestablish control.²⁷ IEDs are the most common type of attack for ISIS in this province, as is the case with most provinces. The total number of attacks is much lower than in Ninewa, but the South also reported an increase in assassinations, targeted attacks, and IEDs, with a decrease in armed attacks.

The reporting from the State of the South uncovers an interesting trend pertaining to the tactics of ISIS in different Wilayats based on the adversary that it is facing there. In the South, ISIS has moved away from armed attacks, instead favoring assassinations, targeted attacks, and IEDs. This shift may be due to direct armed attacks resulting in unacceptably high casualties for the attacking force. Assassinations, targeted attacks, and IEDs come with less risk to attackers, and it is possible to achieve the result of weakening the ISF with lower risk. The trend of changing TTPs to fit the individual Wilayats indicates a perceptive command that has the capability to analyze the objectives it intends to achieve, the adversary it faces, and the environment of the area of operations. The tactics that differ between the different Wilayats are a direct outcome of this analysis and planning.

But the South reported an important attack signature that speaks to the relationship between the ISIS Baghdad and Southern components. Like Baghdad, the South reported a significant increase in VBIED activity. This is also consistent with ISW's observations of ISIS's 2013 campaign of attacks.²⁸ The reported usage of VBIEDs in the Southern operating area more than doubled during 2013. This may again be explained by a greater prevalence of urban areas where ISIS does not have enough support to establish localized attacks, or it may be explained by the establishment of VBIED factories in the area. An extensive VBIED campaign often precedes the entry into an area and the establishment of control and intimidation elements. ISIS may have increased the use of VBIEDs in the South during 2013 to facilitate the establishment of a control zone in the Southern Baghdad belt. ISW assessed that the operational footprint of ISIS expanded in this area after the Abu Ghraib prison attack in July 2013. Indeed, ISIS reported the establishment of three checkpoints in the South during 2013, projecting an increase in territorial control likely from Jurf al-Sakhar.

An important part of the reports is the category "apostates repented". The South Wilayat was the epicenter of this activity according to the 2013 report, stating that "hundreds" had repented in this area. This is an indication of increased influence



Cover art from ISIS Annual Report - 1434 Hijri/2013

over the local population; especially over the Sahwa forces and the Iraqi Police, since these two categories of personnel tend to be the usual targets of ISIS's repentance campaigns.

Diyala

The statistics in Diyala during 2012 and 2013 resemble those of most other provinces. As can be seen in the South, in Anbar, and in Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad, assassinations, indirect fire, HBIEDs and targeted attacks increased in Diyala in 2013. The increased occurrence of HBIEDs in Diyala was reported by ISW, assessing that ISIS's use of HBIEDs was a means of forcing population displacement and intimidating security forces.²⁹ The previously mentioned decrease in armed attacks is also visible in Diyala, indicating that ISIS enjoyed increased freedom of movement in the area. The decrease of

armed attacks in favor of assassinations and targeted attacks may also be interpreted as evidence that ISIS is changing their TTPs to allow for greater control over the intended targets of their military campaign.

The fact that overall attacks in Diyala decreased slightly from 2012 to 2013 may point to an attempt to use Diyala to project ISIS presence into the Baghdad belts or Baghdad itself, as previously assessed by ISW.³⁰ The checkpoints set up in Diyala during 2013 indicate aspirations to control areas in order to further project the organization's influence throughout the province.

Diyala was also the target of ISIS's repentance campaigns according to the 2013 report. While no clear numbers are stated, "dozens" are said to have deserted from the regime and joined ISIS. Adding to this, ISIS states that dozens of "rafidha" [a derogatory term for Shi'a] were expelled from the province. Using this category as correlated with population displacement, that estimate would be consistent with ISW reporting about the area, which has observed that as of October 2013, at least 400 families had displaced from Muqadiyah, increasing sectarian tensions in the province.³¹ Recent ISIS social media reporting has heavily emphasized instances of "repentance" throughout the country, pointing to this as a high-profile effort for the organization.³²

Anbar

Anbar has been the focus of attention for ISIS activities in 2014.³³ In considering the ISIS annual reports concerning Anbar, it is important to keep in mind that reported statistics for 2013 stop in November 2013. Thus the annual reports represent ISIS activity prior to the outbreak of the crisis in Fallujah and Ramadi in December 2013. It is interesting to note during this period that ISIS reported similar attack patterns for Anbar as for Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad, Diyala, and the South. Anbar reported an increase in IEDs, assassinations, targeted attacks as well as the use of indirect fire.

ISIS also reported the establishment of seven checkpoints in Anbar during 2013, in addition to reporting that it took over six cities in the province from 2012 to 2013. This statistic stands out because the events of 2014 had not yet unfolded and ISIS had not moved into Fallujah and Ramadi. The number of cities taken over, therefore, provides insight into how ISIS perceived its sphere of control during the time prior to the 2014 Anbar campaign. It cements Anbar as a province where ISIS assesses that it has the most governance and support. Even though some

of these operations may have been short-term, they signify ISIS's desire to control territory and that the place where ISIS deemed it had the highest chance of capturing and holding urban terrain was Anbar. This assessment proved correct with the events of 2014.

The proximity of Anbar to the Syrian border must also be mentioned. The border crossings with Syria are extremely important to ISIS, providing a line of communication to the ISIS-controlled Syrian city of al-Raqqqa. In addition to this, routes from Syria provide ISIS in Iraq with foreign fighters and supplies that are necessary for the continuation of their military campaign.³⁴

Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad

Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad were treated by ISIS as a single operating area in both annual reports. The "province" received a greater overall focus in 2013 (19.7% of total attacks) compared to 2012 (12.7% of total attacks). Assassinations, indirect fire, destruction of houses, targeted attacks, and most prominently IEDs increased in 2013 while the number of armed

attacks and VBIEDs declined. As has been pointed out before, this indicates an intent to move into an area in order to establish mechanisms of control. With these events in mind, it should come as no surprise that there are also three events in which ISIS claimed to control cities within this operating area. Four checkpoints were recorded as set up in 2013, compared with one in 2012. As in most provinces, reported suicide operations increased in Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad during the year of 2013.

Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad was also one of the operating areas that saw a large increase in HBIEDs during 2013. The other provinces to witness a drastic increase included Ninewa and Kirkuk. ISW previously assessed that the HBIED campaign seemed to emanate from the Za'ab triangle, which lies at the intersection of these three provinces, an assessment that seems clearly supported by ISIS reporting.³⁵ These observed patterns point to the need to observe Salah ad-Din and Northern Baghdad, specifically the area of Tarmiyah, more critically.

Kirkuk

Out of all of the designated ISIS operating areas, Kirkuk had the least number of reported attacks. Kirkuk's attack type proportions are similar to those of the other provinces, except for an increase in armed attacks. The increase in armed attacks could be connected to ISIS control in the area being contested by the presence of Ansar al-Islam. As an increase in armed attacks in 2013 was only reported by ISIS in Baghdad and Kirkuk, this may also reflect ISF security measures to protect these two cities. Government efforts to further secure the city of Kirkuk included such measures as digging a trench to the south of the city as a physical barrier to keep extremists out.³⁶

Kirkuk witnessed a dramatic increase compared to the prior year in the destruction of buildings (HBIEDs). Meanwhile, five checkpoints reported in the area indicate a certain freedom of movement. It is important to note that ISIS includes eastern Salah ad-Din as part of its Kirkuk Wilayat according to its social media. ISIS most likely controls territory through checkpoints in this area just north of Diyala and Lake Hamrin.³⁷

Baghdad

The most prevalent reported attack type in Baghdad was VBIEDs, the number of which increased significantly in 2013, corresponding to increased overall ISIS activity in Iraq. The increased number of armed attacks, interpreted as small arms



Cover art from ISIS Annual Report - 1433 Hijri/2012

Type of OP	Baghdad		Ninewa		South		Diyala		Anbar		Salah ad-Din and N. Baghdad		Kirkuk		Total	
	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013
Assassination	171	95	162	438	77	130	67	78	26	108	63	202	19	32	585	1083
Armed attack	13	73	549	69	67	53	83	19	91	48	71	50	13	24	887	336
Bombing (GL+Rkt)	1	4	153	132	52	59	33	96	42	146	77	108	1	12	359	607
HBIEDs	13	6	148	365	41	52	111	140	87	63	122	275	26	114	648	1015
Prisoners freed	Several	Hundreds	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Dozens	0	0	0	Dozens	Hundreds
SVBIEDs	6	1	1	23	4	2	4	6	1	18	3	11	3	17	22	78
SVESTs	7	81	2	11	2	7	0	11	3	21	2	24	2	5	18	160
VBIEDs	69	251	36	27	48	125	44	38	33	23	68	47	32	26	330	537
MCBIEDs	2	1	2	0	0	1	4	2	7	4	6	4	1	2	22	14
IEDs	136	78	950	1672	318	370	411	555	450	617	352	931	147	242	2764	4465
Knife murders	0	0	7	0	41	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	48	0
Targeted attacks (DF, IED)	0	51	4	393	3	92	0	103	0	156	8	217	1	35	16	1047
Sniping	0	0	1	4	1	18	4	29	0	4	13	2	0	0	20	57
Apostates repented	0	0	0	0	Several	Hundreds	0	Several	0	0	Several	0	0	0	Several	Hundreds
Cities taken over	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	0	3	0	0	1	8
Apostates run over	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Checkpoints set up	0	0	0	4	0	3	0	7	0	7	1	4	0	5	1	30
Rafidha expelled		0		Dozens		0		Dozens		0		0		Dozens		Hundreds
Total Ops	371	641	1694	3138	493	1054	600	1095	581	1220	573	1878	188	514	4500	9540

attacks, may signify that ISIS has ambitions to increase their physical presence in Baghdad, whereas they are now assessed to possess pockets of control on the outskirts and in the surrounding belts. ISW has assessed that ISIS support zones in the Baghdad Belts allow them to manufacture VBIEDs and transport them into the city.³⁸ Reported assassinations decreased in 2013, but targeted attacks rose by approximately the same amount, possibly indicating that ISIS shifted its reporting of similar attacks from one category to another. This could also, however, indicate a shift in TTPs for 2013 to go along with the heavily increased level of VBIED activity.

Baghdad does present one interesting exception: other provinces reported a very high number of IED attacks while Baghdad did not. To explain this, the operating environment must be considered. Baghdad witnessed more VBIEDs than emplaced IEDs, for example, because ISIS lacked territorial control in the city in late 2013. The assumption that ISIS lacks control in Baghdad is reinforced by the reasonable estimate that IEDs should be more prevalent because they are cheaper and easier to manufacture, but are not necessarily easier to deploy. This hypothesis is reinforced by the statistics from the other provinces, where IED use is much more widespread.

In Baghdad, the urban environment is likely a factor that reduces IED use. It is not difficult to conceal an IED in the countryside, either in the vegetation of an orchard or dug down into a dirt road. In Baghdad, not only is there a much higher ISF presence that interferes with IED emplacement, there are also significantly more witnesses due to the high concentration of population. Nighttime emplacements are also not as viable for both of the previous reasons. The intended goals of a VBIED and an IED

also differ: ISIS often uses VBIEDs in Baghdad to create a large amount of casualties, targeting Shi'a neighborhoods to stoke a sectarian conflict. The extensive use of VBIEDs in Baghdad is likely a calculated decision, with ISIS varying its TTPs to fit the unique conditions of the particular area of operations.

CONCLUSION

ISIS has a disciplined military command that reports attacks across operating areas that has operated in this manner for at least two years. Through an analysis of attack types and numbers in each of ISIS's designated states or provinces, it is clearly visible that, while ISIS is tailoring its TTPs to fit the operating environment of individual provinces, the organization is making several nation-wide changes to its tactics. This is a strong indication of a unified, coherent leadership structure that commands from the top down. It proves that while the provinces may have leeway to act as they wish in some regards, ISIS has a centralized command structure for its military campaign that is superior to all of the regional military commands in Iraq

This raises the question of how ISIS commands its military forces in Syria. Operations in Syria were not covered in either annual report. The ISIS military reporting system in Syria may be less articulated, or it may have lagged between April and November 2013; nevertheless, recent ISIS activity in Dier ez-Zour demonstrates that ISIS is capable of organizing sophisticated operations to seize control of urban terrain in Syria as well. In Deir ez-Zour ISIS launched diversionary efforts to distract opponents away from a main line of effort, operational design

that reflects advanced planning.³⁹ The relationship between the ISIS military campaigns in Iraq and Syria will be the subject of continued study.

ISIS's progress in its campaign to control territory in Iraq is visible in its reported statistics, with shifts from armed attacks to assassinations/targeting killings and IEDs. The shifts in ISIS's overall concept of operations can be seen in the reports that the organization produces. The emphasis on assassinations, targeted attacks, and IEDs indicate aspirations toward greater levels of control. The establishment of checkpoints and capture of cities are hallmarks of even higher levels of influence, which ISIS is claiming across multiple provinces in Iraq. Thus it becomes clear that while Anbar leads the statistics in numbers of cities occupied, it is not the only province in which ISIS has significant influence and control. It would therefore be a mistake to think that ISIS is only capable of controlling terrain in Anbar.

This analysis supports ISW's assessment that ISIS is pursuing a phased campaign design. ISIS is working to wrest control of Iraq from the ISF at a tactical and operational level. The spread of activities from IEDs to cities controlled, and possibly further to implementing Shari'a law and governance, resembles an insurgent version of "Clear, Hold, Build." The evolution of ISIS's strategy in light of these reports resembles these same control phases, with ISIS behaving as a proper military organization. In Syria, indicators are also emerging of advanced campaign design. ISIS is not simply a terrorist organization, but rather an armed insurgency moving to control terrain. This structure must be taken into account when formulating a strategy to combat the organization; counter-terrorism approaches will fall short.

The pursuit of a controlled military campaign by ISIS in Iraq and Syria undergirds their pursuit of a transnational emirate. How ISIS controls, defends, and expands its territory more directly legitimizes the organization than the endorsement of al-Qaeda, which it has lost. The ISIS emirate centered on ar-Raqqa will continue to mature if the military command remains intact and continues to engage in new offensives. Future organized and synchronized ISIS operations to overcome anti-ISIS elements in Syria, or state security in Iraq, are a real threat. This is a military enemy that requires a considered strategy, military as well as involving anti-ISIS Sunni populations, to defeat it, or it will become a permanent fixture in the Middle East.

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