

AL-QAEDA VERSUS ISIS

COMPETING JIHADIST BRANDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST





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Al-Qaeda Versus ISIS

Competing Jihadist Brands in the Middle East

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Middle East Institute

Counterterrorism Series



ABBREVIATIONS

AQIM	AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHBREB
AQAP	AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA
H.T.S.	HAY'AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM
I.S.I.	ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ
ISIS	ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA
U.K.	UNITED KINGDOM
U.S.	UNITED STATES

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SUMMARY

The 2011 political unrest in the Middle East provided al-Qaeda and ISIS with an unprecedented opportunity for growth. While both groups share the goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate, they approached the goal with different strategies and to differing degrees of success. Al-Qaeda responded to the instability by attempting to soften its image. The group specifically instructed its affiliates to situate themselves in local conflicts and to slow down the implementation of Sharia law. ISIS, on the other hand, focused on seizing territory and violently disrupting state-building efforts. By the close of 2017, al-Qaeda's rebranding has successfully allowed the group to expand its footprint in a number of Middle Eastern civil wars at the cost of its central authority. ISIS, meanwhile, has lost most of its territory but retains the ideological strength to inspire attacks abroad.

KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ A number of al-Qaeda affiliates have re-named and re-branded in order to better embed themselves in local conflicts.
- ◆ In addition to territorial losses, ISIS has lost credibility with the local population due to its brutal style of governance.
- ◆ While al-Qaeda is better situated locally, ISIS remains more popular with the younger generation of jihadists.
- ◆ The underlying causes of both movements are regional instability, the secular nature of regional conflict, and increasing globalization specifically with regards to weakened borders and increased internet use.
- ◆ Competition between both groups for "Jihadist supremacy" has divided international attention and prevented either from being eliminated.



INTRODUCTION

When people took to the streets in their masses across the Middle East in late-2010 and early-2011 to demand liberal reforms and democracy, the assumed conclusion was that jihadist militancy was witnessing its existential defeat. Having long presented themselves as the best, and often as the only alternative model for how to replace repressive and corrupt dictatorships, al-Qaeda and other likeminded groups were suddenly faced with a non-violent rival model, which was displaying a far greater effect. The conclusion drawn in Western governments was that the dramatic success of democratic protest finally proved that jihadists had lost their long sought after base. As many saw it, the fish suddenly found themselves swimming in a hostile sea, to draw upon Mao's famous phrase.

What many failed to foresee, during what was auspiciously labelled at the time as the Arab Spring, was that the advent of popular protest and political change had opened the gates to unprecedented instability, and jihadists were preparing to exploit the resulting chaos. Al-Qaeda's central leadership had since 2008 already been internally discussing the need to soften its image in order to gain the trust of the masses, and the empowerment of revolutionary sentiments gave the al-Qaeda's local affiliates invaluable opportunities to test out this more locally-focused, politically savvy, and pragmatic approach. This approach was attempted first in Yemen and Mali at the outset of the first Arab Spring protests,¹ but the transition from protest to civil conflict in Syria gave al-Qaeda an opportunity to perfect its new long game jihadist model.

While political protest and regional instability provided al-Qaeda with an opportunity to test out and refine its pragmatic localism model, it also provided conditions in which the Islamic State in Iraq (I.S.I.) could both recover from its de facto military defeat by U.S. military forces in 2009-2010, and reassert its ultra-violent model of jihadist extremism and Islamic state-building project. Beginning in Iraq in 2011 and overtly expanding into Syria in mid-2013, ISIS developed and implemented a dramatically different model of jihad, focused on sowing chaos and tearing sovereign countries and communities apart through the use of unilateral sectarian hyper violence, with the eventual objective of replacing chaos with a centrally-controlled Islamic State.

Consequently, the Middle East was faced with the emergence of two divergent models of jihadist militancy—one focused on embedding within existing, local revolutionary dynamics in order to pursue a long-term Islamization of opposition movements; and another focused on using existing instability to sow even greater disorder in order to pave the way toward a



rapid and savage establishment of a jihadist proto state. Both of these contrasting models of jihad have proven to be effective mechanisms for exploiting pre-existing socio-economic weaknesses in the Middle East, and in leveraging power vacuums resulting from Arab Spring instability.

Al-Qaeda has changed significantly since the dramatic attacks on September 11, 2001.

However, while ISIS and al-Qaeda have both benefitted from pursuing these divergent strategies in the near term, both have also presented their own unique disadvantages and vulnerabilities. This paper will seek to explain in more depth how these divergent models

of jihad came to exist; what underlying drivers and trends they sought to exploit; how the emergence of two competing brands has driven the expansion of jihadist terrorism; and how evolving dynamics may see one model triumph over the other, or a reunification of both into a single, doubly-evolved strategic vision. This explanation and analysis will be undertaken through two separate case studies that will detail the differing models practiced by al-Qaeda and ISIS, and highlight the respective drivers that the groups sought to utilize and exploit to further their success. After assessing the two divergent models and the drivers fueling their success, a succeeding section will then lay out the most influential drivers and policy recommendations tailored towards countering them.

AL-QAEDA'S STRATEGIC REORIENTATION

Al-Qaeda has changed significantly since the dramatic attacks on September 11, 2001. Whereas at that time it was a centrally led and commanded organization operating covertly under the de facto protection of a semi-recognized state in Afghanistan, the al-Qaeda of today is more accurately described as a movement of loosely connected locally unique factions operating in the open within broader revolutionary insurgencies.² Al-Qaeda's central leadership had become increasingly distant from its globally distributed affiliates under Osama bin Laden, but Ayman al-Zawahri's time at the helm appears to have catalyzed an acceleration of this decentralization of the al-Qaeda movement, with localized affiliates taking more responsibility for their own tactical and strategic operations, and the central leadership assuming a more distant, inspirational role.



This evolution of al-Qaeda's structure and modus operandi was something largely forced upon it by the consistent U.S. counter-terrorism pressure placed on its leadership heartlands in Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan since late-2001. With less room to maneuver, and at constant threat of detection and targeting by drones, the time taken for al-Qaeda's leadership to respond to even the most significant strategic issues relating to its formal affiliates around the world steadily increased. Micromanaging affiliate operations was out of the question. Thus, as their global leadership became increasingly distant, the local affiliates themselves embraced an increasingly central role over their own decision-making, which consequently created yet more distance from the central command in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The one mechanism used to avoid this decentralization from going too far was the appointment of a global deputy leader operating out of al-Qaeda's most strategically valuable zone of jihad. For a time, this status was given to Yemen, where the leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Nasr al-Wuhayshi, was al-Qaeda's deputy from 2013 until his death in June 2015. However, the opportunities provided by a seemingly intractable civil conflict in Syria and the growth there of a highly effective and popular al-Qaeda linked group, Jabhat al-Nusra, meant that Wuhayshi's successor was to be Syria-based. After his release from Iran in spring 2015 and his smuggling to Syria, that man was Abdullah Mohammed Abd al-Rahman (Abu al-Khayr al-Masri), a veteran Egyptian jihadist close to Zawahri.³ This time, however, al-Qaeda's deputy leader was not a member of a local affiliate as Wuhayshi had been, but was deployed to Syria to operate separately and re-energize al-Qaeda's central leadership, not in South Asia but this time on Europe's doorstep.

...the time taken for al-Qaeda's leadership to respond to...strategic issues around the world [has] steadily increased.



STRATEGIC VISION

Al-Qaeda's ultimate strategic objective is to establish a global caliphate, composed of many localized Islamic emirates formed through a military and propagation struggle. For al-Qaeda however, this is a very long-term goal, potentially necessitating centuries of effort. In the more immediate term, al-Qaeda exists in order to pursue three lines of interrelated effort: to join or to start localized insurgencies against local rulers deemed to be corrupt and insufficiently Islamic; to peacefully spread the fundamental notions of Islam through *dawa*, or religious

Al-Qaeda's ultimate strategic objective is to establish a global caliphate...however, this is a very long-term goal.

outreach; and to conduct a covert terror campaign against the far enemy (the United States, Europe and Israel).

At different times throughout its existence, al-Qaeda has attached different levels of priority to these three facets of operations, but

since the Arab Spring's eruption in late-2010, the local has steadily gained more traction over the international. In other words, al-Qaeda's global and local leaderships have focused more heavily on attaching themselves to, and embedding themselves within, local dynamics of instability, seeking to drive local change and exploit existing instability in order to better the al-Qaeda brand.

Brand awareness was not a reality that emerged solely after the Arab Spring, as al-Qaeda's affiliation with its branch in Iraq had begun causing detrimental effects on the global image of the movement as early as the mid-2000s.⁴ Al-Qaeda in Iraq and later I.S.I. embraced a particularly sectarian strategic vision based on utilizing mass violence that, in al-Qaeda's mind, risked damaging its ability to gain traction elsewhere in the world. Since the Arab Spring, and especially after its public split with the expanded I.S.I. known as ISIS since 2013, al-Qaeda has sought to clearly differentiate themselves from this brutality by amalgamating the first two of al-Qaeda three lines of effort: local insurgency and *dawa*.

The dramatic split with ISIS did not represent the point of substantive change in al-Qaeda's strategic thinking, however. That came as early as 2011, when senior al-Qaeda strategists and leaders had begun discussing the need to substantially soften its image, particularly in areas



where it has newly arrived. In early-2012, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader Abu Musab Abdul Wadud (Abd al-Malik Droukdel) wrote to his forces in Mali, ordering them to treat its people like babies:

The current baby is in its first days, crawling on its knees, and it has not yet stood on its two legs. If we really want it to stand on its own two feet in this world full of enemies waiting to pounce, we must ease its burden, take it by the hand, help it, support it until it stands... One of the wrong policies that we think you carried out is the extreme speed with which you applied Shariah... Our previous experience proved that applying Shariah this way... will lead to people rejecting the religion and engender hatred towards the mujahideen.⁵

While such pragmatic advice was too late to arrive in Mali, similar language was subsequently used in Yemen, where AQAP rebranded itself as Ansar al-Shariah in an attempt to rid it of the notorious al-Qaeda label.⁶ Although more effort was expended there to provide services and introduce a semblance of stability to otherwise chaotic areas

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of southern Yemen, a tendency toward harsh restrictions and penal measures eventually provided the space for a state-backed tribal uprising. It was only in Syria from late-2012 that this evolved al-Qaeda model began to demonstrate discernible success. A year later, Zawahri himself codified some of this thinking in his *General Guidelines for Jihad* document, in which repeated reference was made to the need to avoid killing civilians and other Muslims, as well as to avoid targeting public areas or members of “deviant sects,” unless in defense.⁷



OPPORTUNITIES

Given the ongoing evolution in strategic thinking and the increasing focus on embedding within local struggles, al-Qaeda perceived the onset of political protest and instability in early-2011 as an opportunity, not a challenge. Early that year, al-Qaeda's then deputy leader Atiyah Abd al-Rahman wrote an urgent letter to bin Laden suggesting that leading operative Younis al-Mauritani "send his brothers to Tunisia and Syria and other places" in order to exploit the newly favorable circumstances. Bin Laden himself favored "patience," as he

believed that soon enough, political Islamists would end up filling the political vacuums, which itself would provide opportunities for *dawa*-based exploitation by al-Qaeda.⁸

As 2011 developed, al-Qaeda was presented with multiple opportunities ripe for the picking, with instability and/or civil conflict

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in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Each provided their own unique dynamics, with all producing new or emboldening pre-existing insurgencies, and all taking place in areas where al-Qaeda maintained pre-existing networks and active operations. In Syria, al-Qaeda was presented with an area in which it had rarely been kinetically active, but where it had established extensive foundational infrastructure during the 2003-2010 war in Iraq.⁹ Not only was Syria already well placed to be a theater in which al-Qaeda could rapidly establish a new area of operations, but its proximity to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq ensured that whatever jihadist group developed there would have easy access to recruits and black market supplies.

Yemen also provided al-Qaeda with considerable opportunities, given that it already hosted the global movement's most capable and potent affiliate, AQAP, and was home to swathes of disenfranchised Sunni tribes well-known to AQAP and Ansar al-Shariah operatives. Likewise, the rapid escalation of Libya's situation from protest to civil conflict presented al-Qaeda with opportunities to expand AQIM's regional operations, and to replicate the localism model that was being experimented with at the time in Mali and Yemen. Libya's vast array of weapons depots, and the rapid militarization of the population also played into the hands of extremist groups like those who affiliated themselves with the al-Qaeda movement.



Beyond any single theater, the collective sense of infectious regional change meant that significant numbers of people across the Middle East were naturally susceptible to those advocating alternative social, religious and political models. Poverty, unemployment, corruption, economic and political mismanagement, security repression, and even climate change provided specific conditions for locally-focused jihadists like al-Qaeda to harness. In areas where protest had turned to violence, it was often those with a simple and less corruptible religious foundation that ended up successfully gaining the most credibility. Al-Qaeda was operating in fertile ground.

CHALLENGES

Al-Qaeda faced two significant immediate challenges amid the early phases of the Arab Spring; one political and one military. As mass protest gave way to dramatic political changes in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, it was political Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood that stood in the wings as the best prepared and socially established organizations to fill the vacuums. The populist movements that uprooted Hosni Mubarak and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali from power were not pursued in order to replace repressive

As mass protest gave way to dramatic political changes..., political Islamist movements... [were] best prepared.

dictatorships with any form of Islamic governance. However, it was organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood that had worked most effectively to mobilize as social movements within and often underneath the controls of those outgoing dictatorships. They therefore stood to benefit the most, as they were comparatively better positioned.¹⁰ As Islamists of a more moderate nature, they presented a serious challenge to al-Qaeda's vision of exploiting not only the instability in places like Egypt and Tunisia, but also the opening for new socio-political and religio-political models for governance.

Al-Qaeda was also challenged, or perhaps more accurately threatened, by domestic and foreign attempts—both real and anticipated—to suppress and contain its pre-existing and newly developing presences across the region. In Yemen in particular, intensified U.S. attention



upon AQAP's activities and its continued focus on plotting external attacks on the homeland played at least some role in encouraging the government-led tribal counter-offensive against its holdings in the south. On a local level, many of the early anti-Qaddafi militias in Libya, particularly those who enjoyed support and protection from the U.S. and U.K.-led coalition

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intervention, actively sought to isolate fledgling jihadist factions and separate them from the broader strategic gains made on the ground.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, was the challenge al-Qaeda faced from ISIS and its dramatic

gains in Iraq and proclamation of a caliphate in mid-2014. Initially in Syria in late-2013, ISIS was a direct military threat to Jabhat al-Nusra, which in effect was al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate at the time. That threat translated into a military adversary in early-2014, and then an international strategic competitor after the caliphate announcement. That latter development, and the fact that ISIS demonstrably controlled territory spanning across what had been a sovereign boundary between Syria and Iraq, posed an existential threat to al-Qaeda's jihadist preeminence. That pre-existing jihadist groups across the region and further afield then pledged their allegiance to this ISIS caliphate further undermined al-Qaeda's claim to be the representative of global jihad.

OUTCOMES

In 2017, al-Qaeda arguably finds itself in a more favorable position than its jihadist rival, ISIS.¹¹ Whereas the latter's brutal violence and bold declarations had attracted dozens of governments to coalesce into a coalition seeking its destruction, al-Qaeda's comparatively quieter and more locally-focused approach meant it had been given several years to consolidate progress made prior to ISIS' caliphate proclamation in mid-2014. Consequently, al-Qaeda had achieved a discernible re-energization of a portion of its central leadership now based in northwestern Syria, where it was surrounded by a highly effective, if not dominant jihadist group, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (H.T.S.). H.T.S.'s overwhelming emphasis on the local, however, appeared by mid-2017 to have induced a distance between it and al-Qaeda, at least in terms of command loyalty. In Yemen meanwhile, al-Qaeda had successfully embedded



itself within the Sunni tribal revolution against the Houthis, and effectively exploited the Saudi-led military intervention. Elsewhere, al-Qaeda appeared to be attempting a recovery in Afghanistan, while sustaining operations in Pakistan, Bangladesh, North Africa, Somalia and affiliated operations in many other areas of the Islamic world.

Events since 2011 had also ensured that al-Qaeda's process of decentralization had continued unabated, and affiliate tactics and strategy had become more of a local issue. This process may have provided local al-Qaeda factions with the ability to better embed themselves within local dynamics, and insulate themselves from external threat, but over time, this approach was also revealing serious disadvantages. In Syria for example, where affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra had thrived in an unprecedented way, the pressure to continue seeking local credibility in order to embed further into the local revolution meant more concessions were necessary. The rebranding to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham through a claim to have broken external ties to al-Qaeda was one such concessionary move, which divided the movement's leadership and, later through a complex series of events, led to a further rebrand (to H.T.S.) and aggressive attacks on former opposition allies. Within six months, al-Qaeda's reputation for trustworthiness within the broader Syrian armed opposition movement had discernibly declined, and Zawahri had begun speaking a different language than that used by his forces in Syria, calling for its forces in Syria to revert to a traditional model of guerilla warfare based on a transnational vision.¹² Al-Qaeda's future in Syria appeared to present two possible scenarios: either further concessions and splits in al-Qaeda's senior circles, or a more aggressive assertion of dominance and a further loss of trust within portions of the opposition.

Despite these challenges, the evolution of al-Qaeda's brand to something

perceived locally as being more appreciative of local dynamics meant that continued instability in the Middle East promised to present more opportunities for exploitation. It also raised the possibility that this evolved jihadist thinking could begin to 'mainstream' its way into acceptability amongst some conventional circles in the region, including even within governments. Perceptions of U.S. isolationism combined by regional state frustration at continued Iranian expansionism produces the kind of dynamics that could feasibly catalyze

The rebranding to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham... divided the movement's leadership.



some to consider localized al-Qaeda affiliates as de facto acceptable actors. The evolution of Jabhat al-Nusra into H.T.S., and the resulting distance between it and al-Qaeda's central leadership, looked in June 2017 to have potentially set the group up for possible formal relations with at least one regional government, Qatar. Doha had worked directly with the group for several months to negotiate a population swap in Syria that eventually took place in April.¹³ Such developments represent a dangerous start of a slippery slope for counter-terrorism strategy, but a major victory for groups whose roots lay, at least originally, within al-Qaeda.

THE ISLAMIC STATE'S RESURGENCE

STRATEGIC VISION

Just like al-Qaeda, ISIS' ultimate strategic objective has been to establish a global caliphate. However, unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS rapidly sought to attain this step, beginning in 2011 with a covert entry into Syria and recovery in Iraq, and ending in its public proclamation of a caliphate across those two countries in mid-2014. Although a definitive break between al-Qaeda and ISIS did not take place until February 2014, ISIS and its predecessor, the I.S.I., had

ISIS...had been operating along a markedly different... [strategy] to al-Qaeda since the mid-2000s.

been operating along a markedly different strategic hymn sheet to al-Qaeda since the mid-2000s, when its brutal sectarian practices in Iraq incurred repeated criticism from al-Qaeda's global leadership.

ISIS' preference for violence, mass murder, intimidation and other brutal behaviors is founded in its belief that ultra or hyper violence is

the only tool available to create chaos, to split Westphalian states, and to purify communities from the inside out. Of particular ideological importance in this respect are the writings of Abu Bakr Naji, who spoke of a phased "management of savagery" to first create chaos and then a just and righteous Islamic rule. Naji also stressed that it was only through the "crucial" use of violence and the avoidance of any "softness" that a sufficient sense of strength would be presented as to allow the complete introduction and imposition of Shariah upon the people.¹⁴



In order to achieve its self-proclaimed caliphate status, ISIS framed itself as its name implied: as an Islamic movement that was explicitly seeking to build a pure Islamic state that Muslims from around the world could emigrate to. Whereas al-Qaeda sought to build alliances and avoid enemies, ISIS acted unilaterally and in the interests only of itself and its objective to establish a state-like entity. Territory was almost entirely unshared with others, and rivals were either aggressively managed or violently suppressed. While ISIS was undoubtedly focused on the local, and spent considerable resources trying to demonstrate its ability to provide

While ISIS was undoubtedly focused on the local...its eyes were ultimately fixed on the global.

civilians with services and other governance-related needs, its eyes were ultimately fixed on the global. The establishment of an Islamic State crossing Syria and Iraq then presented ISIS with the fuel to catalyze an expansion by proxy across the Islamic world and further afield, as supporters sought to ride ISIS' wave of apparent success.

With the state project and caliphate a reality, ISIS' strategic vision shifted to its expansion and defense from external attack. As the international gained more importance, ISIS activated plans to deploy fighters into Western countries to strike what al-Qaeda had called the "far enemy." When the international community united to roll back the territorial caliphate in Syria and Iraq, ISIS responded further by encouraging its supporters across the world to launch their own attacks using whatever means available.¹⁵ Even despite suffering substantial losses on the ground, the concept of an ISIS caliphate became stronger on a virtual level, meaning ISIS could continue to draw upon supporters of its strategic vision, who had themselves witnessed its potential and, it hoped, would fight for its eventual return.¹⁶

ISIS had therefore established for itself an alternative model of jihad that stood in competition to al-Qaeda. The significant differences of these competing models of jihad, and ISIS' rapid demonstration of success between 2011-2014, potentially presented the ISIS model as the benchmark for a new, younger and hyper extremist generation of jihadists. Whereas al-Qaeda had gained a reputation for traditionalism and a tendency to resort to extensive theological debates over even minor issues, ISIS presented itself as a jihadist movement that gave no concessions and would achieve its objective as quickly as possible, whatever the consequences.



OPPORTUNITIES

ISIS' predecessor in Iraq, the I.S.I., suffered a strategic defeat following the U.S. military 'surge' from 2007-2010, with 34 of the group's 42-man senior leadership either killed or captured, and all territory controlled by the group recaptured by Iraqi authorities.¹⁷ However, an insurgent group is only as weak as its opponent is strong. The most important U.S.-led efforts to roll back the Islamic State during the surge were led by Sunni Arab tribal fighters in Iraq's western Anbar province. They had been collectively known as the Sons of Iraq coalition and depended at the time upon military support and financial payments from the United States.

When President Barack Obama announced his decision to 'end' the combat mission in Iraq in August 2010, it was assumed that these tribal fighters would continue to enjoy the necessary support from the Iraqi central government in Baghdad. However, with the U.S. military effectively no longer a player in the country, Iraq's then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki demonstrated little support to the Sons of Iraq, who were left to dwindle into irrelevance.¹⁸

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Just as al-Qaeda in Iraq and the I.S.I. had enjoyed the recruitment boost provided by America's decision to pursue de-Baathification in Iraq, so ISIS enjoyed the benefits provided by Maliki's refusal to continue to pay the Sons of Iraq. ISIS recruitment steadily increased, as did its credibility as an alternative to a central government widely perceived within Sunni Arab communities as overly influenced by Iran and hostile to Sunni communities. ISIS

subsequently experienced a significant recovery and regrowth in Iraq through 2011-2014, peaking with its dramatic capture of Mosul in June 2014.

The I.S.I. was also presented with clear opportunities when Syria devolved into chaos in the first half of 2011, and as an indigenous armed resistance movement began to form there that summer. In fact, just as the very first armed resistance groups began to form in Syria, the I.S.I. leadership in Iraq decided to secretly dispatch a cell of commanders to neighboring Syria to create a Syrian wing of the I.S.I.¹⁹ That wing, Jabhat al-Nusra, was covertly formed in October 2011 and announced publicly in January 2012. Until its public break-up in April 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra had been operating—at least on paper—under the authority of the I.S.I. and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The I.S.I. in Iraq had even been covering half of



Jabhat al-Nusra's monthly financial costs.²⁰ As a result of its split with Jabhat al-Nusra in the spring of 2013, ISIS emerged as a transnational entity operating in both Iraq and Syria, and proceeded to pursue an aggressive strategy of expansion across northern and eastern Syria.

Just as was the case with al-Qaeda, ISIS also benefited more broadly from the collective sense of change that swept across the Middle East amid the Arab Spring protests. However, ISIS did not seek to ride the wave of change and use it as a conveyor belt like al-Qaeda; rather, ISIS sought to use the wave of change as a catalyst to sow division and chaos, and destroy nation-states from within. In other

words, the change that the Arab Spring brought about was not just pointed in the wrong un-Islamic directions, but it was also far too insufficient in scale. ISIS sought to entirely transform the world in as short a time and in as destructive a manner as possible.

The final opportunity provided to ISIS post-Arab Spring was the perception amongst some circles of the global jihadist movement that al-Qaeda had failed to achieve any clear territorial or state-building objective, and had in fact become weaker and less united over time. ISIS' model of jihad was internally oriented toward presenting an image of intense unity of purpose, guided through an organizational structure that was intensely controlled and ruled by total allegiance to one's leadership. The fact that al-Qaeda's core leader Zawahri was rarely seen in public and that on the occasions when he did show himself, it was normally to give long-winded theological monologues on video, provided ISIS with an opportunity to demonstrate that it represented a more pro-active movement, capable of collective action and constant results.

ISIS sought to entirely transform the world in as short a time...as possible.

CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge ISIS has faced in recent years has been from determined attempts by the international community to challenge its territorial holdings and defeat its ability to identify as a 'state.' ISIS' use of hyper violence to achieve its goals, and its singling out of minority communities like Iraq's Yazidis, generated the kind of global outcry that necessitated international action. And by identifying so explicitly as a state-like movement whose very existence is predicated on controlling territory and governing populations, those actions have resulted in a self-incurred threat.



Following the U.S. military intervention in Iraq in August 2014, and then in Syria in September 2014, the international coalition against ISIS has grown to 68 member states. The collective military action subsequently undertaken by the coalition had by late September 2017 successfully recaptured a combined total of 83 percent of ISIS territory in Iraq and Syria, including the cities of Mosul and Raqqa.²¹ Although ISIS has created an image in its supporters' minds of what a jihadist caliphate looks like, and proven the fact that one can exist, the extent

ISIS is...likely to face the challenge of maintaining its reputation amongst [liberated] communities.

and pace of these territorial losses represents a serious challenge to ISIS' ability to present itself as a military force protected by God. They also demonstrate opportunity costs to potential supporters of the group in local zones of

instability like Syria and Iraq, who will view joining ISIS at any point in the present or future as carrying with it considerable risks.

In addition to the clear disadvantages resulting from its violent action and rapid pursuit of grand objectives, ISIS is also likely to face the challenge of maintaining its reputation amongst communities now liberated from its iron grip and past victimization. As with most insurgent movements, territorial defeat rarely results in the neutralizing of the ideology underpinning the movement itself. The drivers motivating the insurgency will, more often than not, continue to exist, even if amongst a smaller proportion of the base community. However, the particularly intense violence employed by ISIS, and the deeply repressive nature of its governance, will not stand ISIS in good stead to mount a comeback amongst the same communities at one point in the future. Moreover, the crumbling caliphate of 2017 is the result of ISIS' second comeback, after its first experiment with 'state'-building in the mid-2000s was defeated. Trying a third time and hoping for the same level successful outcomes will arguably face significant challenges.

Finally, ISIS' various *wilayat* that consist of pre-existing jihadist groups who have pledged allegiance to ISIS and its caliphate since late-2014 may begin to stray when the caliphate heartland in Syria and Iraq becomes more negligible. While the 'virtual caliphate' may well persist in supporters' minds on the internet, the ability of surviving ISIS leadership figures to sustain a tight-knit organization with many thousands of fighters distributed across



the world will be severely challenged. Al-Qaeda may have managed to survive this same challenge in years past, but it enjoyed the advantage of not having proclaimed the existence of a discernible territorial entity from which part of its authority derived.

OUTCOMES

By October 2017, ISIS found itself at its weakest point since the start of the Arab Spring and its power looked set to diminish further as coalition forces consolidated victories in Mosul and Raqqa and as a pro-Assad coalition pressed on towards al-Mayadin and al-Bukamal in Deir Ezzor. Thus far, ISIS' particularly violent brand of jihad appears to have reduced their appeal as a potential alternative for disenfranchised Sunni populations in the region. Even in Iraq, where in some cases Iran-backed Shiite militias were a lead force in liberating territory from ISIS, the local communities remained either indifferent to ISIS, or openly hostile to it. It is in this sense in particular that al-Qaeda appears to have trumped ISIS, in that its focus on adapting to local sensitivities has provided it with a more durable insurance blanket if and when faced with a major external threat.

Consequently, ISIS' future prospects as a self-declared territorial entity look bleak. Seemingly irreversible losses in Syria and Iraq are compounded by the detrimental effect they will have upon the confidence and obedience of allied or affiliate movements elsewhere in the world. The only remaining source of hope in the medium-term is that ISIS' caliphate has been established for all to see as a once discernible reality and as an idea, or aspirational vision. Not only did it exist, but its reality sparked the formation of one of the most significant global military coalitions in recent history.

ISIS' future prospects as a self-declared territorial entity look bleak.

That that caliphate 'idea' remains in existence will be ISIS' main source of strength as its territorial project continues to crumble. Should ISIS successfully continue to encourage or 'inspire' terrorist attacks in the heart of Western cities, then its brand will live to fight another day. Should one or more affiliates elsewhere in the world—such as Wilayat



Gharb Ifriqiyyah in Nigeria or Wilayat Sinai in Egypt—manage to sustain a high-tempo of operations and continue their strong affiliation with the original ISIS brand, that may also help tide over the losses sustained in its heartlands. Nevertheless, ISIS’ future still appears to be existentially tied to its existence in Iraq and Syria, and it is there that its fate is most at risk.

KEY DRIVERS AND COUNTER-MEASURES

1. POLITICAL FAILURE, WEAK STATES & INSTABILITY

Clearly, the most significant driver responsible for fueling the recent rise, expansion and consolidation of jihadist militancy, and for the emergence of two divergent, competing models of jihad, has been the rife political and social instability across much of the Middle East. Crippling issues of governance failure, corruption, economic mismanagement, high levels of youth unemployment and more were all brought to the surface during the Arab Spring protests of 2010-2011. Mass protest, state repression, and foreign intervention and interference all then contributed toward an environment in which change was deemed the key dynamic of the region. For some, that trend toward change meant an opportunity not

Should ISIS....continue to...‘inspire’ terrorist attacks in the heart of Western cities, then its brand will live.

for democracy, but for a radical transformation of local or regional governance. Jihadists pounced.

For ISIS, the prevalence of opportunities provided by political failure, and the resulting proliferation of weak states and instability, was something to exacerbate. In keeping with Abu Bakr Naji’s strategic thinking, mere instability was not enough of a

reality to bring about total change—debilitating chaos was necessary. In Iraq and Syria, ISIS took advantage of instability, conflict, societal divisions, political oppression and corruption to tear communities, governments and borders apart. That expansionist project then—for a period of time—expanded at a rapid rate, thanks in part to ISIS’ success in Syria and Iraq, but also due to the prior existence of the same driver conditions of political failure, corruption, economic mismanagement, and so forth.



While ISIS sought to further intensify pre-existing drivers of instability, al-Qaeda aimed to exploit them as part of tailor made locally-embedded and locally-sensitive strategies. Al-Qaeda presented aggravating conditions as a reason for why a positive change was necessary and it posited only al-Qaeda had the ingredients for that positive change. Whereas al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates remained determined to establish Islamic states, or emirates, it calculated that doing so too quickly would spark a secondary popular demand for change, when communities rejected something they were fundamentally unprepared for. Instead al-Qaeda thought, it would take time to inculcate the suitable conditions for such a proclamation. In the meantime, energy was best invested in siding with the masses and inserting itself within broader revolutionary movements with more short-to-medium term resiliency.

For ISIS,... political failure...was something to exacerbate.

Combating this set of drivers is a long-term challenge that will require deep and determined investment from governments in the Middle East and from the international community. Strong diplomatic relationships and resulting financial investments must be made more strictly in accordance with demonstrated attempts to improve socio-political freedoms, to eliminate state-linked corruption, and ensure full ethnic and sectarian political representation. Favoring 'strong' leaders more prone to oppressive behaviors may promise a semblance of short-term stability, but it in fact serves only to further emphasize the underlying drivers that fuel extremism and instability.

2. SECTARIANISM DRIVING REGIONAL COMPETITION

Another key driver that jihadists of all stripes—including Shiites—have exploited to maximum effect in recent years is the intensifying sectarian dynamic that appears to be mobilizing people behind a great power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Although sectarianism has not necessarily been the defining factor behind the Saudi-Iran competition, it has been used by both states to mobilize popular support and militia or proxy recruitment to fight it out in civil conflicts across the region. From Iraq to Syria to Yemen, different regional governments have used the Shiite versus Sunni dichotomy to shape and drive conflict, hoping to eventually win out and acquire greater influence over the other.



That regional governments have played this dangerous and destabilizing game that has directly fueled the very reasons for the existence of groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS. Both jihadist movements have focused their operations in much of the Middle East, and especially in conflict hotspots like Syria, Iraq and Yemen, as being part of a grand sectarian struggle for primacy in the Islamic world. Although no substantive evidence exists to suggest regional governments have directly provided support to al-Qaeda or ISIS, the significant provision of assistance to other, less extreme armed movements has undoubtedly added to the ability of jihadists—especially those linked to al-Qaeda—to play a prominent role as battlefield ‘partners.’ When conflicts in these countries appear to be defined primarily in sectarian terms, then the greatest benefactors will be extremists on all sides. Jihadists then have an interest in sustaining those conflicts, to further their narrative and real-world gains.

Tackling the prevalence of sectarian narratives as driving and mobilizing forces behind regional rivalries is also a long-term challenge, especially given the historical nature of this dynamic. It is also hard to imagine a Middle East in which Saudi Arabia and Iran no longer perceive themselves as determined rivals or competitors for influence. Therefore, the international community’s best efforts would be spent de-escalating existing conflicts; limiting and eventually

When conflicts...appear to be defined...in sectarian terms, then the greatest benefactors will be extremists.

preventing external interference in them; and placing far greater efforts into political dialogue and multilateral diplomatic initiatives aimed at resolving or preventing conflict. Economical and overly risk-averse policies of conflict containment or isolationist

decisions to avoid any involvement altogether have proven especially insufficient in recent years, as revealed in the scale of conflict in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and elsewhere.

3. GLOBALIZATION AND ITS EFFECTS

Another key driver behind the recent growth of jihadist militancy is globalization and its various effects, including the loosening of international borders; easier and more affordable access to international travel; the rapidity of information sharing through the internet; the proliferation of social media and encryption technology; and resulting hyperactive, feverish nature of international news and current affairs.



As events unfolded in the region, whether in Tunisia or Egypt as long-standing regimes fell to protests; in Libya where an international intervention secured the defeat and death of Moammar Qaddafi; or in Syria, Iraq or Yemen where civil war disintegrated portions of the state, news of all kinds spread fast and jihadists found a market for their own propaganda. For the first time, a teenager sat in his bedroom in Paris or London could follow battlefield events virtually minute-by-minute, and when ISIS chose to decapitate Western hostages or to conduct mass executions on video, it found a willing and vulnerable audience online.

...when ISIS chose to decapitate Western hostages...it found a willing and vulnerable audience online.

Extremist materials thus moved from complex, member-only web forums to easily accessed and free social media platforms, where written material, photos and high-definition video could all be uploaded, for free. As more potentially recruitable individuals were reached online, they also found themselves able to communicate with on-the-ground jihadists, using freely available cell phone applications, on which they could coordinate their planned arrival to Syria, Iraq or elsewhere. That globalization and the loosening of international borders had made airline travel less prohibitively expensive, made the actual act of joining a terrorist group a lesser leap that it would have been only a decade earlier. Consequently, the conflicts in Iraq and Syria sparked the greatest movement of jihadist militants ever recorded, far eclipsing the state-backed recruitment of the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s.


Globalization and all of its effects are an inevitable, irreversible reality of the modern world, but they raise a number of substantial challenges from a law enforcement and intelligence perspective. The nature of the airline travel industry in particular demands a greater level of intelligence sharing between governments, and individual government border controls—by air and land—should be more stringently monitored and controlled. Beyond any other sphere, the internet has become an arena of invaluable activity for jihadist groups and the public and private sectors must sustain, if not intensify their efforts to prohibit extremists from having any easy or sustained use of the online space. Increased effort could also be invested in creating large numbers of ‘mole’ accounts, impersonating extremists and spreading disinformation. In an age of 24-hour news in which patently fake content finds



its own readership, the responsible news industry also has an increased duty to serve people best, with credible, verified and serious content. Glorification of warfare and mythologizing of extremists like ISIS do the counter-extremism industry and counter-terrorism community no favors.

4. INTRA-JIHADIST COMPETITION

Another important driver that contributed towards the recent dramatic expansion of jihadist militancy in the Middle East, but that is also a consequence of it, is the intensive dynamic of enmity and competition between the world's two Sunni jihadist 'brands,' al-Qaeda and ISIS. The emergence of these divergent models of jihad was a long time coming, with al-Qaeda's central leadership having been unhappy at ISIS' predecessor movement's brutal violence in Iraq as early as the mid-2000s. That ISIS and al-Qaeda would have come to a divorce may potentially have been foreseeable, but the unique dynamics in existence post-Arab Spring certainly provided the space for differing strategic approaches and military rivalries on particularly important battlefields, such as Syria. The opportunities presented by the post-



...the unique dynamics in existence post-Arab Spring certainly provided the space for differing strategic approaches.

2010 instability and sense of collective change across the region also spurred on jihadist movements to dig their heels in and pursue bold strategies.

Once the dynamic of intra-jihadist competition had been established from mid-2013, and once the two jihadist movements

had begun fighting each other in Syria from early-2014, the lines of differentiation were drawn and both movements sought to out-compete the other on the local and international stages. ISIS' success attracted unprecedented international counter-terror intervention and in response it pursued an intensive direct and indirect foreign attack strategy, coordinating and inspiring dozens of attacks in Europe, America and elsewhere in the region. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, focused overwhelmingly on the local in an apparent attempt to present itself as the favored and more durable jihadist brand, operating not solely in its own self-interest, but in pursuit of popular demands. With both divergent brands in full-operation, the international community faced a complex set of threats, forcing it to preeminently devote



its resources to combating the immediate one posed by ISIS, leaving al-Qaeda to embed itself further, in Libya, Yemen, Mali, Syria and elsewhere.

To most effectively tackle this multifaceted jihadist threat, the international community must acknowledge that countering terrorism and extremism is a long-term struggle that encompasses more than mere military means. Granted, in a dynamic of intra-jihadist competition, an initial emphasis should be placed on combating both movements' territorial holdings; targeting their leaderships; restricting their access to finance; and blocking the movement of prospective foreign jihadist recruits. In pursuing such short-term and aggressive objectives, one would be aiming to weaken the groups' structures and to undermine their credibility, thereby simultaneously de-escalating the cyclical competition between them and weakening both of their capacity for even limited successes.

In conjunction with pursuing the above aggressive policies, there is also an argument for a geographically limited containment strategy, allowing jihadists a small territorial entity in which extremist practice and oppressive rule will 'let them rot' from the inside. This strategy would have the added benefit of better ensuring that such groups would not be welcomed back, should they attempt a comeback years later. In such a scenario, the international community would be presented with invaluable opportunities to sponsor locally-led and managed counter-messaging campaigns, in order to undermine the ideology and the name of the jihadist group in question.

Beyond these short-to-medium term measures, the international community would be best advised to pursue the other policy recommendations set forth in the first three driver sections. These actions focus more on the structural and environmental drivers that could otherwise fuel violent extremism for many more years to come, and which must be tackled determinedly and consistently if we are to have any hope of pulling the rug from under jihadists' feet.

Al-Qaeda...focused overwhelmingly on the local...to present itself as the favored and more durable jihadist brand.



OUTLOOK

The instability that swept across the Middle East since the Arab Spring has provided jihadist movements with durable futures, albeit ones based on differing foundations and seeking the same objective through differing means. The short-termist strategy operationalized by ISIS may have sparked an unprecedented international coalition response, but the rapidity with which ISIS' caliphate was established and the idea placed in its supporters' minds means it has created a cause that is likely to live on long after the territorial caliphate is rolled back. Al-Qaeda meanwhile, appears to have pursued a long-term project in a more durable fashion, building trust and relationships beyond the traditional jihadist sphere in an attempt to secure a protective blanket around any future external threats.

However, al-Qaeda's successful implementation of this 'controlled pragmatism' in Syria and Yemen may be beginning to reveal shortcomings, particularly in the apparent inability to push beyond al-Qaeda's negative brand image to secure anything close to a 'uniting of the ranks' and a transition to a genuine mass movement. In struggling to attain this goal, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate has been forced to announce concessionary rebranding initiatives that both failed to convince Syrians of its intentions and enraged portions of al-Qaeda's most traditional and veteran figures in the region. Consequently, the latest iteration of al-Qaeda in Syria, H.T.S., appears to have distanced itself from al-Qaeda and likewise, al-Qaeda's senior leadership has spoken publicly at odds with H.T.S. tactics and strategy.²² With that same al-Qaeda leadership purportedly preparing Osama bin Laden's son Hamza for a future leadership role, the prospects for a return to the jihadist group's ultra-extremist and transnational ways

The instability that swept across the Middle East...has provided jihadist movements with durable futures.

were on the rise. That Hamza bin Laden's public statements clearly avoided any criticism of ISIS—as was not the tradition for other senior al-Qaeda figures—also suggested the possibility of a future al-Qaeda rapprochement with, or re-co-optation of ISIS.²³

The region's instability has also fueled unprecedented competition between great regional powers, principally Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of whom have utilized their Sunni and Shiite identities as sources for sectarian mobilization to pursue rival interests in weak and fragile states. That geopolitical dynamic of mutually escalatory



action has directly empowered actors that operate based on religious foundations, including in particular those on the more extreme end of the spectrum, like ISIS and al-Qaeda. Intense and intractable conflict; regional competition based in part on sectarian foundations; the rise of multiple competing jihadist movements; and the lack of international will to determinedly put an end to the cycle of

...a territorially weaker ISIS may maneuver itself into a position of not having to fight al-Qaeda.

violence has all played into the hands of extremists coming to the fore in driving violence. Within that existing context, al-Qaeda and ISIS have been competing against each other to emerge as the dominant representative of jihadism worldwide.

Some experts have suggested that continued instability in the Middle East combined with intensive international pressure against ISIS may encourage an eventual rapprochement between al-Qaeda and ISIS, and the creation of an even more capable and dangerous jihadist movement. This scenario remains highly unlikely, given the extent to which both movements have fought each other and declared the other to be religiously illegitimate and worthy of destruction. Unless a substantial proportion of both movements' existing leaderships are killed, a continued state of competition between the two is most likely. However, it is possible that a territorially weaker ISIS may maneuver itself into a position of not *having* to fight al-Qaeda.

ISIS, as a transnational movement, will seek to exploit the virtual level of its caliphate identity to continue to encourage terrorist actions beyond Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, the long-game approach embraced by al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria and Yemen may catalyze a further distancing between operational al-Qaeda factions and the movement's central leadership in Afghanistan-Pakistan. In this case, al-Qaeda would in effect be continuing along the already laid path of decentralization, which on the one hand means al-Qaeda would represent even less of an organization, but on the other, would mean that Middle Eastern states and the broader international community would face an even more diverse and adaptable set of jihadist adversaries.



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