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# CONNECTIONS

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## Disunity in Global Jihad: A Preface

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As this special issue on “Disunity in global Jihad” goes into print in January 2017, the Islamic State (IS) is facing a possible military defeat throughout its territory in Northern Iraq and Syria. Yet, at the same time, it has proudly claimed responsibility for the 19 December 2016 lorry attack on a Christmas market in Berlin and the 1 January 2017 attack on a nightclub in Istanbul. Experts warn that as the self-proclaimed IS caliphate is crumbling, the organization may re-direct its attention, through its many supporters, to carrying out still more terrorist attacks throughout large parts of the rest of the world, including of course in the West.

The heavy focus in the Western media on IS has pushed al-Qaeda (AQ), until recently the subject of most of our counter-terrorist thinking and efforts, into the background of our collective consciousness. AQ, now serving mostly as a unifying brand for the smaller groups operating under its name, is still active, however, and in several places locked in a bloody conflict with IS. The possible military defeat of IS in Northern Iraq and Syria by a combination of local and foreign troops may pave the way for AQ to re-assert itself on the global Jihadist scene. Several of the contributions in the special issue suggest such a development as they discuss the rivalry of IS and AQ in several theaters.

The special issue is based on work done mainly at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), where, as a consequence of the emergence of especially IS, the more traditional counter-terrorist studies have been complemented by more recent counter-radicalization research. Special funding by several Danish ministries has allowed DIIS to build up a consid-

erable research base, part of which is now offered to the readers of *Connections*. The contributors express their gratitude to the Editorial Board of the PFP Consortium for the opportunity to launch this special issue.

Copenhagen, 4 January 2017

### About the Guest Editors

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## The Mole and the Mallet: Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the 'Thirty Years' War' in the Middle East

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the developments of al-Qaida and The Islamic State in the context of the war on terror. The Iraq war 2003 – 2010, including the US Counterinsurgency strategy implemented in Iraq in 2007 onwards, together with the political developments in Iraq after the US withdrawal of combat troops at the end of 2011 is seen as the breeding ground for Islamic State in Iraq and thus for establishment of the Nusra Front (al-Qaida) in Syria. The chapter argues that without political developments based on reliable states in the Arab Middle East there is no solution in sight for ending the conflicts and wars in the region.

**Keywords:** Iraq, Syria, Islamic State, al-Qaida, al-Nusra, War on Terror.

### Introduction

Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen has an arcade game named 'Whack-A-Mole.' The game involves competing about who can hit most moles with a mallet in the shortest period of time. You cannot win against the moles, as they keep popping up from their holes, but you can hit most moles in the shortest period of time. If the moles symbolize al-Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State (IS), and the mallet symbolizes the military instrument chosen by the West to defeat these two terrorist groups in the Middle East, 'Whack-A-Mole' illustrates quite well how the mallet, the military instrument, cannot win against the moles, al-Qaeda and Islamic State. The game is kept going by feeding money into the machine. Obviously, the big question in the war against terrorism is what keeps AQ and IS going? The disheartening conclusion is that part of the explanation is the way in which the war against terrorism has been organized in the Middle East and elsewhere, using the mallet. Another and just as important explanation is the struggle for power, political influence and resources in the authoritarian states

in the Middle East which, with the Sunni-Shia conflict orchestrated by the two regional 'super powers,' Saudi Arabia and Iran, is tearing the Middle East apart. The situation resembles a Middle Eastern reconstruction of the Thirty Years' War in Europe.

## Current Status

However, the war against AQ and Taliban and against the Middle Eastern dictators, Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, has fueled the Middle Eastern conflict. This is the lesson learned from 15 years of war against terrorism in the Middle East. The war was initiated by the bombing of AQ's training camps in the mountains of Tora Bora in Afghanistan, it continued with wars in Iraq and Libya, and has now returned to Iraq and a new war in Syria. AQ has also returned, particularly in Syria and Yemen, but also to other countries. Moreover, Islamic State has spread to areas such as Africa, Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and has established training camps in Syria to train Europeans who return to Europe as terrorists, as we have seen in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016. It is noteworthy that the war against terrorism has contributed to moving terrorist training camps from Afghanistan to Syria, and thereby closer to Europe.

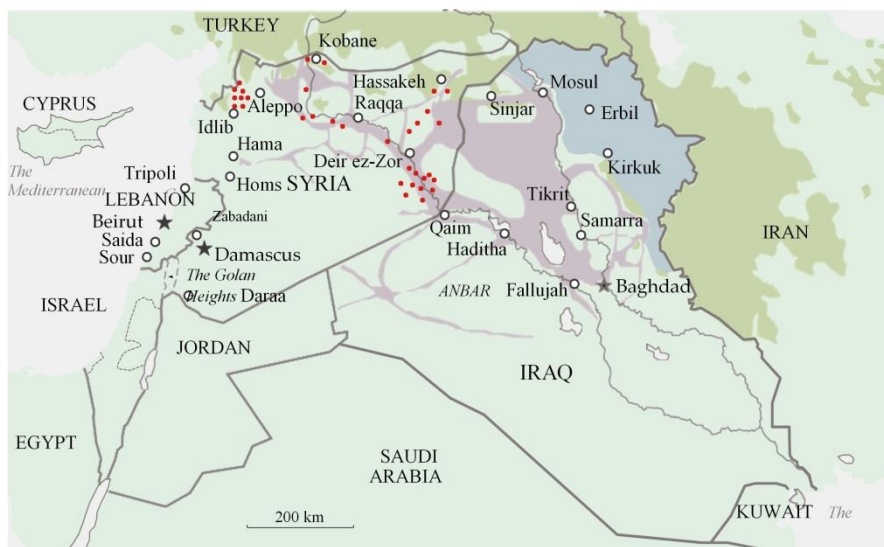
Thus in 2016, we can conclude that AQ, which many people, including the author of this article, considered defeated in 2011 following the killing of Osama Bin Laden, perhaps once again is becoming a dangerous global terrorist organization with declared ambitions of hitting targets in the West as well. Following the death of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011, and the killing of many of the infamous AQ leaders in the drone war intensified by Barack Obama when he became President in 2009, many people concluded that AQ had been defeated and were singing their final swan song.<sup>1</sup> However, others warned that AQ could return and that small AQ networks still existed in the Middle East, which could regain their momentum under the right conditions, and in the right context.<sup>2</sup> They were right, although those who had declared AQ as dying were not entirely wrong. Today a very different AQ is setting the agenda compared to the AQ that ruled under their great leader, Osama Bin Laden. The death sentence over AQ has proven to be true in terms of AQ's senior leadership. Ayman al-Zawahiri is the last of the great leaders who formed AQ, however he does not have the authority that he had in AQ's heyday.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Peter L. Bergen, "Epilogue: The Twilight of Al-Qaeda," in Peter L. Bergen, *Manhunt. The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Katherine L. Zimmerman, "Testimony: AQAP's Role in the al Qaeda Network: Statement before the House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence on "Understanding the Threat to the Homeland from AQAP," American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI), 18 September 2013, available at <http://www.criticalthreats.org/al-qaeda/zimmerman-testimony-aqaps-role-al-qaeda-network-september-18-2013>.





Sources: Institute for the Study of War; Dr M Izady at Gulf2000/Columbia University; The Economist

- Areas in which IS is operating
- Kurdish populated areas
- Kurdish controlled areas
- US and coalition air attacks

**Figure 1: Map of Syria and Iraq.**

Zawahiri is still making statements, regularly with regard to conditions in Syria, and he sends letters with orders to the leaders of the regional AQ groups, such as Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, who courteously distributes the letters to his people, but who does not hesitate to raise questions about the orders in his own statements and interviews (e.g. to the Arabic satellite channel al-Jazeera). However, al-Julani is usually loyal to the ageing AQ leader. When Zawahiri in June 2015 suggested that Jabhat al-Nusra (also known as the al-Nusra Front) should stop planning terrorist attacks on the West, al-Julani backed him up, declaring on al-Jazeera that Jabhat al-Nusra “currently does not regard Syria as a base for attacks on the West.” However, he added that the objective in Syria “is not only to get rid of the Bashar a-Assad regime, but also something greater,” i.e. a Sharia-based Islamic state and, in the long term, a caliphate (quotes from Charles Lister).<sup>3</sup> A mysterious group of

<sup>3</sup> This article owes a great deal to the very detailed presentation by Charles Lister based on primary sources, personal interviews and extensive knowledge about Syria and Jihad networks: Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad. Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015).

AQ operators has travelled to Syria from Yemen and Afghanistan, where they have formed a clandestine group. According to Charles Lister, Syria researcher, Jabhat al-Nusra's own people refer to the group as the 'Wolves,' whereas the CIA has named the group the 'Khorasan Group.'<sup>4</sup> This was the group whose terrorist plans against the West Zawahiri wanted to stop, because the activities of the group triggered the US bombings of the Idlib Governorate in Syria, in which Jabhat al-Nusra is based.

In addition to destroying Jabhat al-Nusra in the fight against Bashar al-Assad, which, according to Zawahiri, is AQ's primary task in Syria, US bombs hit civilians, and this exacerbates the risk of locals joining other groups than Jabhat al-Nusra. However, al-Julani has not stopped the 'Wolves,' because their specific skills may become useful in future, e.g. if the West intensifies the war against AQ (alias the al-Nusra Front) in Syria.

Osama Bin Laden's actual operational influence was already on the wane in his final years in his self-imposed exile in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where he was hiding from US agents and advanced satellite surveillance. Bin Laden communicated through a courier with regional AQ leaders in North Africa, on the Horn of Africa, in Yemen and elsewhere, but they rarely followed his advice and orders.<sup>5</sup> As mounting pressure from the US drone campaign began to cause AQ's senior leadership to fall apart, authority and autonomy grew in the regional leaders, whose focus was on the regional conflicts in which they were and are involved. As AQ's senior leadership withered, AQ's global terrorist actions—and thus the 'existential threat' that the organization posed according to the Americans—was minimized and transformed to regional terrorism which was not a direct threat against either the US or Europe. The strength that AQ has regained in Syria now involves an actual risk that, in the long term, the organization could once again become a global threat. This is partly due to the monomaniac war against IS as, in the shadow of this war, AQ is winning support and gaining strength, just as we saw when Russia began its offensive in Syria in September 2015. Even though AQ is very different now—less centrally controlled and with a more regional approach, and with new names such as Jabhat al-Nusra—it is back in the game with a new strategy that may be even more dangerous in the Middle East and to the West than the old centrally controlled strategy under Osama Bin Laden, which primarily targeted the US, and is aiming to remove the superpower from the Middle East.

With the return of AQ and IS, which, although under pressure in Iraq and Syria, are gaining ground elsewhere and have documented their intention and ability to organize terrorist actions in Europe, the terrorist threat seems to be steadily increasing, 15 years after the war against terrorism began. This article

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<sup>4</sup> Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 201.

<sup>5</sup> Nelly Lahoud, Stuart Caudill, Liam Collins, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, Don Rassler, and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sideline?* (West Point, NY: The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2012), available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sideline>.

describes the history and background of IS and outlines and assesses the development of AQ over the past five years.

The changed AQ, in which regional divisions are becoming ever more independent from AQ's central leadership, is illustrated quite well by Jabhat al-Nusra's official break with AQ in late July 2016.<sup>6</sup> There had long been rumors, or at least since May 2016, that Jabhat al-Nusra, the strong insurgent militia in Syria, would break with AQ in order to be able to act more flexibly in relation to other Islamist rebel groups in Syria. So far, these groups had (officially) refrained from joining forces with Jabhat al-Nusra because of the group's connection to AQ. Connection to AQ prevents participation in ceasefire negotiations, as the international players will not negotiate with AQ groups. In May 2016, al-Zawahiri announced that he would have no objection to Jabhat al-Nusra breaking with AQ and instead concentrating on the fight in Syria. However, he stressed that the two groups would still have a common future goal to establish a caliphate. In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra's leaders announced that the group had broken with AQ and would change its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. This article describes the development of Jabhat al-Nusra up to the break with AQ in July 2016.

## **The Iraq War**

The Iraq war in particular is key in understanding the situation currently unfolding in Iraq and Syria, and thus in understanding why IS and AQ have returned as global terrorist threats after the threat seemed to have been almost eliminated around 2011.

When Bashar al-Assad took over from his father in 2000, Syrian intelligence services tried to expand Syria's power by establishing contact to various Islamist networks and AQ groups, which were emerging in the Iraq/Syria border area. The idea was partly to make life as miserable as possible for the Americans in Iraq on the "if they're busy fighting there, they'll leave us alone" basis, and partly to divert attention from internal problems and to export Jihadists to Iraq. When the war in Iraq broke out in March 2003, Islamist groups and networks in Syria became key players in the recruitment of foreign fighters, in particular for the insurgency against the US-led coalition. The Syrian border area towards Iraq became a hub in the organization of cross-border traffic, but it also became a reception area, in which training camps were established. Several of the major operations in Iraq were organized by networks in Syria. The Syrian intelligence services let this happen, but had very little control over the development.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Al-Nusra leader Jolani announces split from al-Qaeda. Al Jazeera obtains exclusive video of Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, saying group's name has changed to Jabhat Fath al Sham," *Al Jazeera*, 29 July 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 31ff

Similarly, in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi intelligence services had tried using militant Islamist groups to promote their interests.<sup>8</sup> This meant that before the war began in 2003, there were already links between the Syrian and Iraqi intelligence services and Jihadi groups. These links saw further consolidation when Saddam Hussein's officers fled to Syria at the beginning of the war after Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, ordered the Iraqi army to be disbanded. Thus, Syria played a central role in bringing foreign fighters to Iraq. Moreover, Iraqi rebels could find refuge in Syria and return to the Anbar province. The same dynamics were seen with different Taliban and AQ networks across the Pakistan/Afghanistan border.

As the US counterinsurgency operations from 2007 and 2008 in fact reduced violence considerably in the Iraqi Anbar province, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) came under major pressure from its members fleeing to Syria, the threat from these networks began to concern the Syrian regime, which phased out its laissez faire strategy towards the Jihadists and imprisoned hundreds of people who had been responsible for bringing foreign fighters into Iraq. According to Charles Lister and other researchers, these were the people that Bashar al-Assad pardoned and released from prisons in March and May 2011 when demonstrations began in Syria. The intention was probably to use these people to stage the Syrian insurrection as 'being controlled by international terrorists,' but instead he reactivated the networks that had been particularly effective in terms of supplying foreign fighters to the insurgency in Iraq, and now they had turned against him and the Damascus government. With the city of al-Zabadani north-east of Damascus as their base, Islamist rebel groups were quickly and efficiently established, and they attracted many sympathizers who had turned against the al-Assad regime with violent attacks that must have taken the Damascus regime completely by surprise.<sup>9</sup>

Bashar al-Assad's narrative that foreign terrorists were behind the Syrian insurrection backfired uncontrollably with deadly consequences. This is where the story of Jabhat al-Nusra, AQ in Syria, begins. However, in fact the Iraqi group Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) sent Julani to Syria to establish the al-Nusra Front. Before we continue with al-Qaeda in Syria, a summary of the Iraqi backdrop is necessary.

## IS' roots deep in Iraq

Prior to ISIL's conquest of Mosul in June 2014, there were plenty of signs that a new global terror threat was developing. The signs were based on two aspects – the political situation in Iraq and the Arab Spring in 2011. However, this development was either toned down or completely overlooked by politicians, the media and intelligence services, who expressed confidence that the Iraqi

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<sup>8</sup> Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003. Ba'thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2014)

<sup>9</sup> Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 54.

*Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the 'Thirty Years' War' in the Middle East*

1999	Name	Leader of the Group	Leader of the Network
	Jund al-Sham	Abu Musab al-Zarqawi	Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

2003/ 2004	Name	Leader of the Group	Leader of the Network
	Jund al-Sham	Abu Musab al-Zarqawi	Abu Musab al-Zarqawi
	<i>Changes name to</i> Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad	Abu Musab al-Zarqawi	Abu Musab al-Zarqawi
	<i>Changes name to</i> Committee for al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (AQI)	Abu Musab al-Zarqawi	Osama bin Laden

al-Zarqawi dies

2006	Name	Leader of the Group	Leader of the Network
	AQI	Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (Abu Ayyub al-Masri)	Osama bin Laden
	<i>Merger between AQI and Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) 7 other groups:</i> Majlis Shura Mujahidin (MUM)	Abu Omar al-Baghdadi	Osama bin Laden
	<i>Changes name to</i> Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) = AQI	Abu Omar al-Baghdadi	Osama bin Laden

Abu Omar and Abu Hamza die

2010	Name	Leader of the Group	Leader of the Network
	AQI / ISI	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	Osama bin Laden

2011	Name	Leader of the Group	Leader of the Network
	AQI / ISI	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	Ayman al-Zawahiri

2012	Name	Leader of the Group	Leader of the Network
	Jabhat al-Nusra	Abu Muhammad al-Julani	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi / Ayman al-Zawahiri

The conflict between ISI and AQ ignites

2013	Name	Leader of the Group	Leader of the Network
	Islamic State in Iraq (al-Baghdadi: Merger between al-Nusra and ISI)	Abu Muhammad al-Julani	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi  Ayman al-Zawahiri
	(al-Zawahiri / al-Julani: Jabhat al-Nusra)	Abu Muhammad al-Julani	

Break between ISIL and AQ

2014	Name	Leader of the Group	Leader of the Network
	Islamic State / Islamic caliphate		Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

**Figure 2: The Islamic State 'Family Tree.'**

government was capable of keeping ISI under control. ISI had otherwise carefully kept accounts of the group's activities, and these were published in statements and annual publications. At the same time, local journalists expressed their concern about ISI's ever-greater power and influence in Iraqi areas dominated by Sunni Muslims, including Mosul, which became a power center for ISI after 2010.

Since 2010, ISI has been run strictly and autocratically by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Ibrahim bin Awwad bin Ibrahim al-Badri al-Radawi al-Husseini al-Samarrai) together with his second in command Hajji Bakr (Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi), who had had a career as a colonel in the military intelligence services under Saddam Hussein. Hajji Bakr was killed in January 2014 in a small town north of Aleppo in Syria. Together with other groups, ISI formed an alliance, as they were furious that they had been marginalized from political power: first by the US-led invasion from 2003 onwards, and then by the Iraqi Prime Minister at the time, Nuri al-Maliki, who systematically kept Sunni Muslims from gaining

political power, including the 'Sons of Iraq' who helped his government and the US suppress AQ from 2007-2010.<sup>10</sup>

The story behind the formation of IS dates back to 1999, when the Jordanian Jihadist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh) was released from prison in Jordan.<sup>11</sup> In prison, he had become acquainted with Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi,<sup>12</sup> a Jordanian-Palestinian scholar of Islam, who had inspired the violent and criminal thug, al-Zarqawi, to Jihad, focusing particularly on Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Palestine (the Levant). In 2004, Maqdisi and al-Zarqawi had a conflict because of al-Zarqawi's war against the Shia Muslims. Al-Zarqawi insisted on declaring the Shia Muslims Takfir (apostates) and therefore they had to be killed. This is the exact same situation we see today, with IS calling the Shia Muslims Rafidis (deniers). AQ's senior leaders were also critical towards al-Zarqawi's insistence on attacking the Shia Muslims, and when IS declared the area a Caliphate in 2014, Maqdisi and other prominent Islamists with links to AQ also expressed strong criticism.

When al-Zarqawi was released from prison, he established the Jund al-Sham group, which soon after changed its name to Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (Unity and Jihad). As early as 1999, the group was responsible for several attempted terrorist actions in Jordan, e.g. the 'Millennium Plot,' which was averted by the Jordanian security services. Al-Zarqawi went to Afghanistan, where he met Osama Bin Laden. He did not become part of AQ, but Osama Bin Laden helped al-Zarqawi establish a training camp in Afghanistan around the city of Herat. When the US attacked Afghanistan in 2001, al-Zarqawi's group put up resistance until it fled through Iran and established a new training camp in Iraqi Kurdistan, with close connections to the Ansar al-Islam group which, at that time, was headed by Mullah Krekar (Faraj Ahmad Necmeddin). Back in 1991, Krekar was granted asylum in Norway as a refugee from northern Iraq. However, in 2001, he was in Iraqi Kurdistan with other high-profile Jihadists with connections to AQ, and together they established Ansar al-Islam. In his speech to the UN Security Council in February 2003, the American Secretary of State, Colin Powell, referred to Ansar al-Islam and various leaders, who also included Abu Musab al-Suri, when he presented the reasons behind the Iraq war. When the war against Afghanistan unleashed in October 2001, many AQ followers fled to Iraqi Kurdistan and joined Ansar al-Islam. Thus, foreign Jihadists in-

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<sup>10</sup> Lars Erslev Andersen, "The Locals Strike Back: The Anbar Awakening in Iraq and the Rise of Islamic State," in *Reconfiguring Intervention: Complexity, Resilience and the 'Local Turn' in Counterinsurgent Warfare*, ed. Louise W. Moe and Marcus-M. Müller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Beside of Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, the narrative of the history of IS is inspired by William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse. The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of The Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015); and Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS. A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, "Heirs of Abu Bakr: On the Ideology and Conception of History in al-Qaeda and Islamic State," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 25-36, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.16.1.02>.

creasingly influenced Ansar al-Islam. Krekar ended up being pushed aside by the recently arrived Arabic veterans from the war in Afghanistan and returned to Norway via the Netherlands. Al-Zarqawi took control of the group and gathered the recently arrived Jihadists and Iraqi rebels in Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad.

Al-Zarqawi became infamous for his extremism and brutality through the gruesome videos in which hostages were decapitated, and through his group's systematic attempt to stir up civil war between Sunni and Shia Muslims e.g. by bombing Shia Muslim mosques and holy sites. The release of a video showing the liquidation of American citizen Nicholas Berg in May 2004 shocked the world as a symbol of al-Zarqawi's brutality. This is alarmingly reminiscent of the notorious violent actions by IS we are seeing today. Today, al-Zarqawi is considered a role model and a martyr, and is admired by IS. He has taken on the same role and status as Osama bin Laden did in AQ. Even though AQ leaders strongly criticized al-Zarqawi's attack on Shia Muslims and would have preferred him to concentrate all his efforts against the Americans and the collaborative Iraqi government, in October 2004 al-Zarqawi's group officially became part of the AQ network under the name Al Qaeda's Jihad Committee in Mesopotamia. The group remained part of AQ even after the death of al-Zarqawi. The current conflict between IS and AQ had already been established with the criticism by AQ leaders of al-Zarqawi's sectarianism. In 2005, a letter from AQ leader, al-Zawahiri, to al-Zarqawi came into the possession of the American intelligence services. In the letter, Zawahiri stresses the necessity of maintaining support from the local population. AQ in Mesopotamia (Al-Qaeda in Iraq, AQI) did not follow this advice, and instead led the cities they controlled rigidly and dogmatically, thus alienating the local Iraqi population. This misreading of the ideology, strategy and situation in Iraqi society led to 'insurgency from below' against AQ, headed by a number of Sunni tribal leaders and sheikhs – the Anbar Awakening.

Al-Zarqawi was killed by American forces in a targeted attack on 7 June 2006 north of the city of Baquba in Iraq. Violence in Iraq escalated constantly and rapidly during this period, especially in the Anbar province and around Fallujah – the hub of AQI's insurgency. The conflict with al-Qaeda was aggravated by the death of al-Zarqawi, as his successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, took an oath of allegiance to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who shortly before this had been appointed Commander of the Faithful (emir al-muminin) of ISI.

ISI came into existence after Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad had joined forces with five other Jihadi groups and subsequently changed its name to Islamic State Iraq. With his oath of allegiance, Abu Hamza subjugated the AQ army to ISI, which naturally made Osama bin Laden angry. This conflict did not go public, but became known through the documents collected from Osama Bin Laden's house in Abbottabad after US Special Forces killed him in 2011. Osama Bin Laden was furious because AQ considered it premature to declare themselves a state, as the criteria for an Islamic state had yet to be realized. In addi-



tion, the AQ leader was displeased that Abu Omar al-Baghdadi had assumed command of up to 12,000 warriors without his approval. ISI was earnest about announcing a state, and this is the definitive difference between IS and AQ. IS (ISI at the time) wants to realize an Islamic state right away using violent methods, whereas AQ wants to slowly build the state up from scratch, with AQ at the head. One might expect that Abu Hamza's oath of allegiance to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi would have resulted in ISI no longer being part of AQ. This was probably also what Abu Omar al-Baghdadi thought, but not Bin Laden and Zawahiri.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, ISI was officially part of the AQ network up to February 2014, when the new AQ leader, al-Zawahiri, following a long open conflict, dramatically renounced Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the question about to whom the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra should refer. It is interesting to see that there is a direct link between al-Zarqawi and his disagreement with AQ, and the break between AQ and Islamic State today. Thus, AQ and IS have developed quite differently since around 2006. This is particularly apparent in their different interpretations of strategy and image of enemy. Therefore, IS and al-Qaeda should not be viewed as one group. They differ (and always have differed) considerably in many important areas. This is clear from the Abbottabad documents to which al-Zawahiri refers in his criticism of IS. Nevertheless, it is most appropriate to view ISI and AQI as part of the same organization up to the change of name in April 2014, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, following a conflict with Zawahiri and the leader of the al-Nusra Front, al-Julani, declared Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) the only valid name of the two groups. He was wrong though, as Jabhat al-Nusra, with Zawahiri's blessing, kept operating under the old name.

### **The New al-Qaeda in Syria: Jabhat al-Nusra**

For a long period from 2007 to 2010 it looked as though ISI/AQI were about to be defeated and eliminated in Iraq. Local tribes were dissatisfied with how AQI foisted its fundamentalist ideology upon them and controlled their local communities and resources. Moreover, they were increasingly under attack by the government army in Baghdad and by Shia Muslim militias.

In other words, they were being attacked on two fronts and they feared that the situation would only worsen if Iran gained even more influence on the government in Baghdad. At the same time, the Americans were changing their strategy from pursuing the enemy, AQI, to protecting the local population. The new US Chief of Command in Iraq, David Petraeus, made a big deal of the fact that these two trends came together. The locals were to hunt down AQI with support, training, weapons and pay from the US. The president at the time, George W. Bush, had been advised to withdraw his troops from Iraq, but instead he increased the number of soldiers by 20,000 and extended the period

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<sup>13</sup> Lahoud, et al., *Letters from Abbottabad*.

in Iraq for an additional 10,000 soldiers who should have otherwise have returned to the US (the Surge). Their task was to protect the local population in order to win their 'hearts and minds' and to train the 'Sons of Iraq' made available by tribal leaders to the Americans in the war against AQI. 'Sons of Iraq' constituted about 100,000 men who fought at a salary of USD 300 a month. The operation, named the Anbar Awakening, was successful in the sense that it sent AQI on the run. Most of them went to Syria, where the intelligence services now saw them as a threat and therefore took firm action against them and sent them to prison together with others from the Syrian Jihad centers.<sup>14</sup>

Some Jihadists were able to escape to Lebanon. In 2005, Syria had been forced out of Lebanon, but still had important interests in the country. The Jihadists migrated, particularly to areas in northern Lebanon around Tripoli, where they infiltrated the Palestinian group supported by Syria, Fatah al-Islam, which, in 2007, in the refugee camp Nahr al-Barad was responsible for fighting against the Lebanese army that killed more than 400 people. When the insurgency had been defeated, some of the Jihadists hid in the Palestinian refugee camp at Ain al-Helweh in southern Lebanon close to the city of Saida.<sup>15</sup> The al-Nusra Front and IS rely on these networks with ramifications to Syria and the Anbar province when they recruit fighters. This is a major problem for Palestinians in Lebanese camps who are not interested in being associated with these Jihadi networks. This is also more generally a problem for Lebanon, as the presence of these Sunni Muslim Jihad networks is threatening to move the civil war in Syria into Lebanon in the form of confrontation with Hezbollah which is fighting for the al-Assad regime. So far, together with Hezbollah, the Lebanese army has managed to prevent the Syrian conflict from spreading to Lebanon. However, a major terrorist action by IS in Beirut in November 2015 testifies that there is a risk that the war in Syria will spread to Lebanon. Lebanon has received more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees and, obviously, this is putting a lot of pressure on such a small country.

The Iraqi tribes behind the Anbar Awakening were primarily interested in security and influence on the Baghdad government (and not 'hearts and minds'). As the Americans had implemented their new Counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy without ensuring loyalty from the Nuri Al-Maliki government in Baghdad, the situation turned upside down when the US withdrew combat troops at the end of 2011. Influenced by Iran and his Shia Muslim power base, Maliki pursued sectarian policies that blocked Sunni Muslims from serving in the army and from gaining power in Baghdad. Already in 2010, when the al-Iraqiya party, which included both Sunni Muslim tribes and secular Shia Muslims, won the election, Maliki deprived them of power and thereby cemented the sectarian line.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lars Erslev Andersen, "The Locals Strike Back."

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Rougier, *The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East. Northern Lebanon from al-Qaeda to ISIS* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Lars Erslev Andersen, "The Locals Strike Back."

The result was an escalation of violence, and a plethora of Islamist groups in AQI regained their strength and merged with other groups led by the officers who Paul Bremer had sent into the dark in 2003 when he dissolved Saddam Hussein's army. Thus AQI/ISI were back in the game. They built themselves up systematically, e.g. by infiltrating power structures in cities in the Anbar province and by starting a campaign of terror aimed at prisons, through which hundreds of AQ members were released. The goal of ISI was to regain power in Iraq and to create an Islamic state, and from 2012 the group, which by now should rather be called a Sunni Muslim insurgent army, increased in strength. The former leader Omar Abu al-Baghdadi had been killed in 2010 and replaced by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who had been released from a US prison in Iraq, Camp Bucca, in 2009. For years, the new leader had been part of the Islamist networks, and he had a PhD in Islamic Sciences from the University of Baghdad. Together with former intelligence officers and other AQ personages, he turned ISI into an insurgent army that, with an effective strategy, mafia-like methods and brutal sectarian violence, became an ever-increasing threat to the regime in Baghdad and to Iraqi Kurdistan.

While ISI was regaining its strength in Iraq, the civil war developed in Syria. In only a few months, the situation changed from demonstrations to escalations of violence, which were primarily due to the regime's brutal reaction to the demand for reform. Officially, the regime in Syria declared that the demonstrations were due to terrorists from outside, and that these terrorists were causing the violence. In order to see this for himself, Bashar al-Assad released some of the Islamists the regime had imprisoned from 2007, and who had been the driving force in recruiting foreign fighters from Syria to Iraq. Like casting out fry to catch fish, Islamists were set free to convince the international community that foreign terrorists were causing the violence and to frighten the local Syrian population. However, the situation immediately came out of control, and the Islamists quickly used their network and organized Islamist-based insurgency against the al-Assad regime.

In Iraq, ISI decided to open a Syrian front and to take part in the Syrian insurgency. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delegated the task to Abu Muhammad al-Julani, and activities were financed by ISI and by rich AQ sympathizers in Kuwait and Qatar. Julani, who is Syrian and had had a long career in ISI under al-Zarqawi, was sent to Syria as early as in August 2011. In Syria, he travelled to different rebel towns and formed the group that later became Jabhat al-Nusra. Jabhat al-Nusra was officially declared a Jihadi group with links to al-Qaeda on 23 January 2012. The group quickly became a strong organization which attracted sympathizers from the Gulf, Yemen, North Africa, the US and Europe, including Denmark. Within a short time, Jabhat al-Nusra became one of the strongest and most important militias in the Syrian opposition. Their ideology was close to that of al-Qaeda, which was not surprising given that in 2011 ISI was still a recognized part of the AQ network. The success of Jabhat al-Nusra was partly due to strong discipline, but also a good dose of pragmatism. Thus,

the goal of Jabhat al-Nusra's fight was to establish an Islamic emirate, and in the long term a caliphate, which was to be run by a Sharia-based ideology, including hudud punishments (cutting off hands, beating, whipping etc.), but the principles were not to be strictly enforced during war. In other words, Sharia and hudud could wait until the future emirate. Jabhat al-Nusra's leaders had learned from AQ's mistakes in the insurgency during the war in Iraq against the US and the new Iraqi leaders following Saddam Hussein. Instead of introducing a strict Sharia codex to the citizens of the villages, cities and areas under the control of Jabhat al-Nusra, the group prioritized security, supplies of oil and petrol to the areas in which they controlled such resources, and protection of local hospitals and health clinics even though patients and staff were secularized and not religious. Jabhat al-Nusra did not repeat AQ's mistake in Iraq; i.e. they did not alienate themselves from the local population in Iraqi cities and towns. Instead, Jabhat al-Nusra took a pragmatic approach in a conscious endeavor to establish a good relationship with the local population in Syria. In the resistance, the group also cooperated with other Syrian insurgent militias, Islamists as well as secular militias, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was formed only a few months before Jabhat al-Nusra. Together with discipline and skilled leadership, this pragmatic approach was probably the foundation for Jabhat al-Nusra's success, both locally and in the recruitment of fighters from outside. There are reports that some fighters joined Jabhat al-Nusra not for political or religious reasons, but because the group was better organized than many of the other rebel militias.

### **Establishment of ISIL and the Conflict with al-Qaeda**

Jabhat al-Nusra's success was an increasing cause of annoyance for the leaders in ISI, who saw from Iraq that in December 2012 the Syrian sub-division was included on the US list of terrorist organizations, and that the leader, al-Julani, had become the most wanted person in Syria. These were both clear signs of Jabhat al-Nusra's strength in the Syrian insurgency. ISI leaders, who probably feared that Jabhat al-Nusra would develop into an actual rival, tried several times, although unsuccessfully, to pressure al-Julani to declare publicly that he and Jabhat al-Nusra were being controlled by ISI and al-Baghdadi. Finally, on 8 April 2013, after having explained the group's different names since its formation by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of ISI, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, issued a statement in which he said that Jabhat al-Nusra was an ISI offshoot. ISI had established the group as a front in Syria to create and prepare a future Islamic state, which was to stretch over an area from northern Iraq and into Syria. From then on, both groups would be named ISIL. Neither ISI nor Jabhat al-Nusra would continue as valid names.

Two days later, al-Julani confirmed that al-Baghdadi had ordered the establishment of al-Nusra, and that ISI had supplied al-Nusra with weapons, money and manpower, but that the al-Nusra Front as well as ISI were under AQ's highest-ranking leaders – they were both local AQ groups and had to obey the

leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Abu Muhammad al-Julani continued to swear allegiance to al-Zawahiri and confirmed that nothing had changed, despite Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's statement two days earlier. This was the start of an open conflict between the Syrian and the Iraqi AQ groups, and ended with a unique confrontation between AQ and what later became known as Islamic State. Supplies of weapons to Jabhat al-Nusra were stopped, and ISIL began to take control of arms depots and areas in which Jabhat al-Nusra had been strong. This took place with brutality and with disregard for the Syrian revolution. The fight against Bashar al-Assad's regime did not have first priority. First priority was to secure control of important areas in Syria in order to maintain a strong position in Iraq.

ISIL did not focus directly on fighting the Assad regime, but primarily on controlling areas from Aleppo, through agricultural areas, strategic points and oil resources, into Iraq. This meant that Assad had no interest in attacking the group with his fighter planes. For a period, he even bought the oil that, strictly speaking, the group had stolen from the Syrian regime. On the other hand, the various rebel militias formed a common front against ISIL, which became completely isolated in Syria at the turn of the year from 2013 to 2014. Attempts to mediate between ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra failed. On 2 February 2014, this led the AQ leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had initiated the mediation attempts, to officially declare that ISIL was no longer part of the AQ network because of its strategy and unwillingness to cooperate.

This was the first and, so far, only time that an AQ group was excluded from the network, and Ayman al-Zawahiri's declaration caused a stir in international media and was communicated under headlines such as "Who are Isis? A terror group too extreme even for al-Qaida" (The Guardian, June 2014). With the break from al-Qaeda, ISIL engaged in an open war with the entire Syrian opposition, including the Nusra Front. However, in actual fact, in 2014 ISIL became much stronger than the languishing old AQ senior leadership. The conflict briefly led to internal divisions within Jabhat al-Nusra, in which several members who felt more closely connected with al-Baghdadi than with al-Julani left the Nusra Front and joined ISIL. By the time that the conflict between AQ and ISIL went public, ISIL had lost considerable ground in Syria due to the united forces of the other opposition groups. However, during January and February 2014, ISIL regrouped and quickly gained control of strategically important areas and areas with many resources in Deir Ezzor. During the spring of 2014, the group regained areas in eastern Aleppo, and consolidated in al-Raqqa – the main city for the group in Syria.

The fight against al-Assad did not motivate the entire expansion into Syria, but the objective was to counteract a weakening of what became known as Islamic State in June 2014. The overall objective of IS was to complete a broad Sunni-Muslim-based revolution against the government in Iraq in order to establish a caliphate, which, for historical and religiously apocalyptic reasons should cover the area around the city of Dabiq in northern Syria, because reli-

gious scriptures predict that this is where the final battle is to take place. The expansion was at the same time as ISIL took control of Fallujah and besieged Ramadi in the Iraqi Anbar province. Thus, ISIL quickly gained ground in both Iraq and Syria in spring 2014.

On 10 June 2014, ISIL surprised everyone when they occupied Mosul. On TV, it looked as though rampaging hordes of Jihadists were driving away a large and well-armed Iraqi army, and questions soon arose: how could such a group, estimated to consist of around 3-5,000 men, pester and defeat an entire well-armed army? Some media could report that only 800 Jihadists had sent 30,000 soldiers on the run (five divisions). However, ISIL's strength should hardly have come as such a great surprise, given the successes of the group earlier in the year in both Iraq and Syria, and not least given how for years the group had systematically consolidated in Sunni Muslim cities in Iraq and gained increasing support from other Sunni Muslim groups and people. As mentioned earlier, local Iraqi journalists and analysts had long been writing about how ISI had taken control of Mosul using terrorist actions and mafia-like methods. In other words, ISIL could so effortlessly take over a large city like Mosul because the group was already in control of most of the city and through terrorist actions had acquired weapons, money, businesses and support networks.

ISIL was not only a Salafist fundamentalist group, but, at least from 2010, a well-run organization with support from many Sunni Muslim militias, an effective strategy and an ideology that they were building a cohesive Islamic state that could deliver on all parameters. This seemed to be attractive to many people in the region, in Europe and elsewhere, as a record number of volunteers flocked to Syria and Iraq. What we saw in Iraq, with ramifications into Syria, was a Sunni Muslim insurgency that was not limited to the brutal Islamic State, but which had much broader support from others, including non-religious groups, who all felt completely abandoned by the government in Baghdad, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq in Iraqi Kurdistan, al-Assad's regime in Damascus, the US and the international community.

### **The al-Nusra Front and IS**

Jabhat al-Nusra rapidly recovered from the setback from the conflict with IS, in which the Front had to witness a large number of its fighters join al-Baghdadi's troops. Jabhat al-Nusra quickly regained ground, and new recruits joined the group. Jabhat al-Nusra has also been able to cooperate with other Syrian rebel militias, especially Ahrar al-Sham, and at times also the FSA. As mentioned earlier, the Al-Nusra Front had been included on the US list of terrorist organizations in December 2012, and in September 2015, the CIA announced that the al-Nusra Front had formed the Khorasan group, which was the CIA name for the group of AQ veterans who had joined the al-Nusra Front in Syria from Yemen and Afghanistan and according to several sources are now hiding in the Idlib Governorate. Since September 2015, the US has been attacking al-Nusra. Together with France, the Americans have maintained that Jabhat al-Nusra is

an AQ group, and that the group therefore cannot be part of negotiations on the future of Syria. Despite this, al-Nusra has continued its pragmatic approach, aiming to defeat the al-Assad regime, and all the evidence shows that the al-Nusra Front's strategy will succeed in the sense that the group is gaining ever more ground and support in the fight. At the same time, the leader of al-Nusra, al-Julani, maintains that cooperation or even reconciliation with IS is out of the question. The leader of AQ, Zawahiri, has encouraged militias in Syria several times to stop fighting each other and instead focus on the war against the regime in Damascus. When there was heavy fighting over the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus, IS and the al-Nusra Front fought together against Syrian government forces, which were supported by Palestinian militias under Ahmad Jibril from the PFLP-GC. Therefore, there was speculation that perhaps al-Nusra and IS were approaching each other.

All things considered, fighters from the al-Nusra Front had changed side. Jabhat al-Nusra sprang from IS, and some members will probably still find that they feel more allied with al-Baghdadi than with al-Julani, particularly if an occasion to do so arises. We are likely to see more of such shifts, but in essence there are no indications that the al-Nusra Front and IS are approaching each other. However, there is much speculation about this. In Foreign Affairs, Bruce Hoffman, the famous terrorism researcher and professor at Georgetown University, puts forward four arguments that IS and AQ will merge in an explosive cocktail. But so far, this has been rejected as pure speculation by the parties themselves.

Even though the US and perhaps France have bombed the al-Nusra Front in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra is benefitting from the fact that the international campaign is primarily aimed at IS. AQ seems to have learned from its mistakes. Instead of foisting their interpretation of the Quran and Sharia on the local population in Syria, AQ is using a more long-term approach and is working on becoming part of society in order to gain support. If the political, economic and power situation does not change radically, the conditions that enable groups and networks such as IS and AQ to return time and time again will prevail, like the moles in Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. If the militant Jihad networks are to be combated effectively, it is important to understand the historical, social and political circumstances that breed groups such as AQ and IS, and to address these issues. So far, the war against terrorism has failed to do so.

Spring 2016 still saw several reports that IS is under pressure from a military as well as an economic perspective. The main cities, Mosul, Fallujah and Raqqa, are under siege, and financially IS is increasingly being deprived of revenues from oil sales. Nevertheless, IS is far from broken. Even if IS is broken within the foreseeable future, the networks of Jihadists which have been established throughout the region from Lebanon over Syria to Iraq, will still be present, and so will the problems which to a large extent constitute the basis for the insurgency war and the sectarian conflicts.



## Conclusion: IS, AQ and the 'Thirty Years' War' of the Middle East

Decisive political change is necessary in both Iraq and Syria in order to allow for new stable governments that can create a society based on the rule of law and secure conditions for Syrians and Iraqis. This is the only condition for effectively combatting extremism in the region. As we saw in 2014, defeating IS in Syria and Iraq starts in Damascus and in Baghdad. In this way, the George W. Bush administration and his neo-conservative advisers were actually right: It takes a change of regime! However, the solution is not, as Bush wanted, to bomb democracy into the Middle East, or what we are seeing now, to bomb IS without thinking about what needs to come next. There is no doubt that a united world against IS would defeat and dissolve a caliphate. In spring 2016, there were many signs and much spin that IS is under pressure. However, as IS is displaced, al-Baghdadi's group is gaining ground in the areas in which the West has already fought wars such as Afghanistan and Libya. It does not take much imagination to see that the current strategy by which the West and Denmark have joined the 'Thirty Years' War' in the Middle East is a Sisyphus project that is almost as promising as hitting a mole with a mallet in Tivoli Gardens.

## About the author

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## Heirs of Abu Bakr: On the Ideology and Conception of History in al-Qaeda and Islamic State

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**Abstract:** This article investigates references to early Muslim history by al-Qaeda and Islamic State, and notes a remarkable difference. While al-Qaeda has traditionally referred to the battles of the early Muslims during the time of the prophet Muhammad, the Islamic State centers its references on the successor to the prophet, the caliph Abu Bakr. Hence, Al-Qaeda, in line with Sayyed Qutb's notion of a "Qur'anic program," evokes a mythical past as if it is relived today. The Islamic State, in turn, takes a somewhat more pragmatic line, arguing that events today, like those of the earliest caliphs, are merely the outcomes of human decisions in a post-prophetic and post-Qur'anic age.

**Keywords:** Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, Abu Bakr, caliphate, ideology.

### Introduction

Did the Caliphate cease to exist in 1924, or was it dissolved after the Mongolian invasion of Bagdad in 1258? Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda (AQ) believed in the first claim, whereas Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and IS seem to consider the second contention to be true.

This article will analyze the differences between the uses of historic references by the two movements, and discuss the implications. Despite the substantial resources invested in studying Islamic State (IS) in particular, this issue has not yet been the subject of systematic examination by researchers, and the current study is only a first attempt. The study will focus on a few central ideologies that use the early Islamic wars to justify present wars, though each in its different way. The article will examine how these ideologies have confronted each other over the past one-and-a-half years.

## Phases of Jihadism

As is generally known, the concept of Jihad in Muslim history has been used about a number of religious endeavors, e.g. asceticism, but in Islamic law and political thinking Jihad immediately takes on the meaning of war against non-Muslims. Today, the concept may be used in Arabic in entirely secular contexts, for instance class struggle or national endeavors. However, the meaning of war “for the sake of God” (*fi sabil Allah*) is still the dominant understanding of the concept, and this conception has become even more pronounced over the past 50 years of Jihadism.

In Denmark, politicians and commentators generally do not use the term Jihadism, but rather Islamism, and there seems to be a general consensus that the phenomenon of Islamism was conceived in 1928, when Hassan al-Banna formed the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. This is also factually correct. However, Islamism is a multifaceted concept. As the word suggests, Islamism sees Islam as a political ideology and a model for organizing a nation and society. However, there is substantial disagreement on how a country and a society should be organized. Some Islamists reject parliamentary democracy, whereas others claim that it is mentioned in the Quran; and some Islamists reject constitutions, whereas others believe that the very concept of ‘constitution’ was introduced by Mohammad in Medina. The Danish foreign policy debate suffers from people using the concept of Islamism without being aware of its exact meaning; all they know is that they need to distance themselves from it. However, if no distinction is made between the different forms of Islamism, there can be no way of understanding what is going on in the Muslim world, or even among Muslims in Denmark. For example, in Syria, different Islamist groups are fighting on the side of the regime, or for the rebels or for IS.

IS are Islamists in the sense that they commit to an ideology of establishing ISs and societies. Their roots also go back to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements. Yet today, they are highly critical towards the wider Islamist movements. Their strategic as well as their ideological standpoint is completely different and, therefore, I will use the term Jihadism here.

According to the Jihadist ideology, continuous Jihad is a duty for the individual Muslim, also in relation to those who claim to be Muslims, but who do not subscribe to this ideology; people who should be considered hypocrites or apostates in the sense of the Quran. As the true Muslims are therefore few in number and engaged in an unequal battle against the world’s tyrants (*ta-waghith*), they will most likely die in action. However, this is exactly what God expects of them, and His reward will be Paradise, as well as a guarantee that, as long as they remain on earth, the few true warriors will be victorious in the end (*al-ta’ifa al-mansura*).

This ideology of a small avant-garde group of true believers, who understand God’s demand for war, was first formulated in the Arab world by Sayyed Qutb (1906-66) in the 1950s – the decade in which the Muslim states finally won independence. The ideology of the new states was based on nationalism,

and the Islamist movements who saw Islam as a modern state ideology were marginalized and sometimes even relentlessly suppressed. From the 1970s, Qutb-inspired movements were established in various places, and, like the revolutionary socialists and nationalists, they believed that violence was a legitimate means of achieving their political goals. In the 1980s, these Jihadists went to Afghanistan, which had been invaded by the Soviet Union, and the *al-Mujahideen* (the Arabic word for “those who make Jihad”) were financed, trained and armed by the Pakistani, Saudi and US intelligence services.

Having thus become professionalized, in the 1990s part of the Jihadist movement decided to launch a global Jihadist fight against US hegemony, which culminated with the attacks in 2001. In the fight against AQ, in which the US has been involved since then, many of the movement’s leaders have been eliminated or taken prisoner, but the movement has not been effectively defeated. New ideological leaders, such as Abu Musab al-Suri, have pursued a strategy by which the movement is not concentrated in a (vulnerable) territory, but it is organized in loose, autonomous networks, not least in Europe.<sup>1</sup> The renowned Jihadism researcher Gilles Kepel refers to this as the third phase of Jihadism, which follows the national and the global phases.<sup>2</sup> In the Muslim world, another ideologist, Abu Bakr Naji, has advocated a strategy of using extreme violence to destabilize and control territories and make them ungovernable, so that their citizens gradually accept a tough Islamic law-and-order regime. The inspiration for this came from developments in Iraq, where a relatively successful US invasion in 2003 ran into severe problems when the toppled dictator Saddam Hussein’s intelligence officers joined forces with the Jihadists from AQ.<sup>3</sup>

### **Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada**

The story above has been told many times. We will now move on and take a closer look at two other prominent Jihadist ideologists, who support AQ and what they refer to as the global Jihadist movement. We will see these two ideologists contending with IS. They are both Palestinians from Jordan and both were born around 1960, just like me, but they have grown considerably longer beards.

Probably the most important of the two is Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (born in 1959). Al-Maqdisi grew up in Kuwait and studied at several universities, but he is mainly self-educated. From early on, his aim was to unite the re-

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<sup>1</sup> Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad. The Life of al-Qaida Strategist Abu Musab al-Suri* (London: Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Beyond Terror and Martyrdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> Lars Erslev Andersen, “The Mole and the Mallet: Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the ‘Thirty Years’ War’ in the Middle East,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 7-24, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.16.1.01>.

bel ideology of political Islamism with the conservative theology of Salafism, and he found a connection in classical Wahhabism. In his first book, *Millat Ibrahim* (1984), he modernized the classical Wahhabism by applying its traditional (Quran) term *bara'* (to refrain from and renounce polytheism, in the same way as Abraham) to present-day Muslim presidents and kings and their political systems. At the same time, he emphasizes that merely condemning with your heart is too weak; hatred and Jihad are more praiseworthy. Thus, he prepares the ground for confrontation with the political elite, but without accusing Muslims of heresy, if they are not willing to go that far.<sup>4</sup> After the Palestinians were thrown out of Kuwait in 1991, al-Maqdisi came to Jordan, where he and a student, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, established a militant group. Soon after he was imprisoned from 1994-1999. Since then, he has been in Jordan.

The other AQ ideologist is al-Maqdisi's friend, Abu Qatada al-Filstini (born in 1960). Abu Qatada is also self-educated and he also travelled in Pakistan in the late 1980s. However, he is primarily known as a preacher in London in the 1990s, and for a lengthy trial resulting in his deportation from the UK to Jordan in 2013. Whereas al-Maqdisi has a calm demeanor, Abu Qatada is aggressive and likes to make provocative statements, clearly in order to raise awareness of Jihadism in wider circles and to recruit new fighters.

After the US and a coalition of countries went into Iraq in 2003, al-Maqdisi supported the struggle against the western forces, as did all other Jihadists. However, at the same time al-Maqdisi published several writings in which he criticized al-Zarqawi's use of extreme violence and suicide attacks, and his accusation of heresy – not only of Shia Muslims, but also of the Sunnis in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi responded with a statement against al-Maqdisi, in which he accused al-Maqdisi of raising his critique in order to secure his release from prison.<sup>5</sup> The echo of this exchange in 2005 between the two ideologists could be heard 10 years later when al-Maqdisi, again from a base in Jordan, criticized IS, who acclaim al-Zarqawi as their ideological founder.

## Who, then, are the IS ideologists?

IS also have their ideologists, and just like al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, they do not have long careers in the established Islamic research institutions. On the contrary, they want to break away from established Islam.

The most prominent IS spokesperson was Muhammad al-Adnani who was killed in an US air attack in the summer of 2016. He was actually Syrian, from the northern town of Binnish, where he was born in 1977 and given the name Taha Subhi Falaha. Although they have been to Pakistan, al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada are only ideologists, but al-Adnani was an actual warrior. He took part in the rebellion against the US invasion troops in Iraq in 2003, and here he met

<sup>4</sup> Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi. The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 170-173.

<sup>5</sup> Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi*, p. 48.

Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi was the leader of AQ in Iraq, but friction with the leaders in Pakistan caused him to go his own way until he was killed in 2006. Al-Adnani spent some years in prison and became part of the inner circle of IS in Iraq. He was the obvious choice when the movement went into Syria in 2012, and it was he who proclaimed the Caliphate at the beginning of Ramadan in 2014.

The other ideologist from IS is the young Turki Bin'ali, who was born in Bahrain in 1984. After short periods of study in Bahrain, Beirut and Dubai, he attracted attention as a dedicated disciple of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the puritan 18th century thinker, who is a kind of national ideologist in Saudi Arabia. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was opposed to any kind of religious innovation and urged for armed reaction against anyone not following his puritan interpretation of Islam. Today, Saudi Arabia is not as Wahhabist as it used to be, and Bin'ali and IS blame the monarchy for this development. They publish Muhammad ibn al-Wahhab's writings on the internet, pinpointing discrepancies with modern Saudi Arabia, and they are behind the bombings of the Shiite minority in the country, who have been marginalized by the monarchy, but who have not—as Ibn Abd al-Wahhab would have preferred—been completely eliminated. In April 2014, Turki Bin'ali published a statement providing the legal justification for establishing a caliphate, even though not all preconditions are present. The reasoning behind this was to speed up the process based on the Quran 24:55, in which God is said to promise that he will reward the true believers with a caliphate. Al-Adnani used this argument in his announcement of the Caliphate, "God's Promise."

## **How to become a caliph**

The 2011 rebellion in Syria quickly led to the Jihadist movement in Iraq moving into the Syria; first personalized by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani and the Jabhat al-Nusra front group, and later on by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and IS in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS). AQ's international leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, supported the former front group, and in the winter of 2014-15, the two movements were fighting each other. The al-Nusra front and their allies won.

However, as soon as the following summer, ISIS succeeded in conquering the major Iraqi city of Mosul in a surprise attack, and from this very city, al-Baghdadi was proclaimed the first Caliph of al-Adnani on the symbolic date of the first Ramadan. ISIS changed its name to IS and since then, the movement has "remained and expanded" (the movement's slogan) in the western part of Iraq and the eastern part of Syria, albeit with growing casualties. On the Friday following the proclamation, the Caliph held his inaugural sermon in the Great Mosque of al-Nuri, citing the first Caliph Abu Bakr's famous words from his inaugural sermon in 632: "If I do well, help me; and if I do wrong, set me right."

A few days later, Abu Qatada sent out a statement to the Caliphate in which he condemned the new Caliph as illegitimate (*batil*). According to Islamic law, the Caliph should have been appointed by a council of qualified Muslim repre-

sentatives (*ahl al-shura* – Jihadist leaders from all over the world). In an interview with the international newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat* from his prison cell in Jordan, Abu Qatada interpreted the statement as a strategic move, which did not address all Muslims, but was simply an attempt to get ahead of the larger AQ-oriented Jihadism. Furthermore, he stated that al-Baghdadi's methods "combined failed elements from *al-rawafid* and *al-khawarij*."<sup>6</sup> This is a serious accusation in the Jihadist universe; *al-rawafid* is an abusive term for Shia Muslims, and *al-khawarij* (the *Khawarij*), is the religious direction which caused disputes among Muslims shortly after the Prophet's death because of its rigid and intolerant view on who could be a Muslim and who could be a leader, and because it was responsible for the death of the fourth Caliph, Ali.

The latter point of criticism had already been raised by Turki Bin'ali in the spring. In a ten-page "Statement in response to Abu Qatada," Bin'ali speculated on how a man like Abu Qatada, who had published books of such magnitude and importance, could backstab the Mujahideen. It could only be due to lack of knowledge of their situation and an unfortunate development in prison. Bin'ali suggested that Abu Qatada was simply being used as a tool by the Jordan intelligence services. He concluded that Abu Qatada's books can still be trusted, but that it is no longer possible to have confidence in any statements he makes from prison.

After the announcement of the Caliphate, Muhammad al-Adnani, IS's other chief ideologist, issued an even tougher response to the movement's Jihadist critics: people may listen to Muslim scholars from all over the world. But they can also see who is winning. We are. So, we have the support of God. Muhammad al-Maqdisi has also had numerous disputes with the leaders of IS. As the mentor of al-Zarqawi, who IS considers to be its first leader, he believed that he could influence IS when Mu'adh al-Kasasiba, a Jordanian pilot, was shot down and IS announced that they would execute him. But not only was al-Maqdisi unable to save al-Kasasiba; he also discovered that IS had in fact executed the pilot while they were negotiating with al-Maqdisi.<sup>7</sup>

In short, there was not much mutual respect. The culmination of the poor relationship came when both al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada signed a fatwa which allowed the true Mujahideen to defeat IS in self-defense. They called IS "Baghdadis," i.e. supporters of a sect led by al-Baghdadi.<sup>8</sup> At that time, IS and Jabhat al-Nusra were in direct confrontation at Aleppo.

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Al-Da'ma, "al-da'iyya al-urduniyya al-mutashaddad Abu Qatada yantaqad l'lan al-khilafa al-islamiyya," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* 16, no. 7 (2014), available at <http://aawsat.com/home/article/139131>.

<sup>7</sup> Joas Waagemakers, *Al-Maqdisi in the Middle*. 2015; available at <http://www.jihadica.com/maqdisi-in-the-middle-an-inside-account-of-the-secret-negotiations-to-free-a-jordanian-pilot/>.

<sup>8</sup> Abu Qatada al-Filastini, Muhammad al-Maqdisi et al.: *Fatwa*, June 3, 2015, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/fatwa-June-3-2015.pdf>.

Abu Qatada and al-Maqdisi are not the only ideologists with links to AQ, and who have had confrontations with al-Adnani, but they are among the most famous, and the fights between them have been going on intermittently for some time, most recently in May 2016, when IS published a long document, "Obliteration of the icons." This document argued that the Jihadist ideologists who have expressed their sympathy with the Muslim Brotherhood should not be considered part of the movement of true believers, because the Brotherhood has accepted parliamentarism, cooperation with the infidel, etc.<sup>9</sup> The document was targeted at the AQ ideologist, Abu Musaab al-Suri, but could also have been targeted at Abu Qatada, who, after the revolutions in 2011, was encouraged by the public support for the Islamist movements, although he believed that they should immediately be challenged.<sup>10</sup> Only two days after the publication of "Obliteration of the icons," al-Maqdisi released a statement saying that this obliteration, which also included the religious martyrs, showed that IS had developed into an extremist sect (*ghulw*), which was also parting with its own more knowledgeable ideologists.<sup>11</sup>

## The history of the Caliphate

The different interpretations of political authority are also reflected in the different datings of the fall of the Caliphate. Osama bin Laden seems to follow the same course that we know from Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Denmark. This view holds that the western powers, including the early Zionists, decided to undermine the Ottoman Caliphate, first in 1876 with the introduction of a constitution, and again in 1908 with the Young Turk Revolution, when nationalists deposed the pious Abd al-Hamid II and instated another Caliph who they could control. A third occasion was in 1924 when the newly established Turkish Parliament decided to abolish the office of caliph.

For IS, the Ottoman Caliphate was not a real caliphate because the Ottoman did not descend from the Prophet's tribe, Quraish. In their view, the Caliphate fell 750 years ago, with the Mongolian invasion of Bagdad and the assassination of al-Musta'sim, the last Abbasid Caliph, who was wrapped up in a carpet and drowned in the Tigris. The Abbasid Dynasty, which ruled from 750 to 1258, were true descendents of the Quraish, but had become weak over time. For IS, the foundation of the dynasty around 750 is therefore the primary source of inspiration. Carrying black banners, the rebels came from Khorasan (an area which now covers the north-eastern part of Iran and the southern part of Cen-

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<sup>9</sup> Abu Maysara al-Shami, *Tamas al-rumuz* (2016), available at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/abucc84-maysarah-al-shacc84micc84-22obliteration-of-the-icons-abucc84-muscca3ab-al-succ84ricc8422.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Abu Qatada al-Filastini, *al-Muqaraba li nazilat al-'asr*. Copenhagen: al-Nur, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, *al-radd 'ala Abu Maysara*, 2016, available at <http://jihadology.net/2016/05/14/new-release-from-shaykh-abu-mu%e1%b8%a5ammad-al-maqdisi-reply-to-abu-maysurah-on-seeking-to-obliterate-the-icons/>.



tral Asia) to fight the morally corrupt Umayyad dynasty in Damascus. The Abbasid capital was temporarily located in Raqqa before it was moved to Bagdad – a dream that IS also has. IS consciously draws these parallels: the movement uses the same flag, and they name their territories after the old Abbasid provinces (*wilayat*). Furthermore, the Caliph has taken the name al-Baghdadi al-Quraishi, which means that he is a descendent of Quraish and that he is from Bagdad. Originally, his name was Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, and he actually comes from another Iraqi town, Samarra. However, what is more important is the first name he has taken: Abu Bakr.

## Abu Bakr

Abu Bakr was the Prophet's close friend and brother-in-arms. He also succeeded the Prophet, and the word caliph means "a successor to the Prophet." In 632, on the night the Prophet died, there was a major council (*shura*) to discuss the future. There were several candidates for the leadership, but everything was settled when Umar, one of the Prophet's brothers-in-arms, with loud and clear voice pledged allegiance (*bay'a*) to Abu Bakr, and the others followed suit. Soon after, Umar himself became the Caliph, when Abu Bakr died in 634.

IS sees Abu Bakr's two years in power as the guiding light for their strategy and legitimacy, because this period represents the time when a state was gradually taking shape, although many aspects of the state were still very cloudy. Firstly, many Arab tribes broke their alliance with the Muslims because they considered their oath to be a personal oath of allegiance to Muhammad, who had now died. Therefore, Abu Bakr had to spend most of his time and effort on wars against these tribes, forcing them to renew their oath. The wars are known as the Ridda wars, which means the wars against the apostates. IS uses the same term for their wars against the Arab tribes in Syria, and especially in Iraq, where the tribes joined forces with the US in a rebellion against IS in Iraq (ISI), a forerunner of IS. Since 2014, the tribes have either been defeated or co-opted. Subsequently, some have simply been slaughtered, whereas others have been forced to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr at great ceremonies, and participate in re-education programs which are claimed to be modelled on Caliph Abu Bakr's education of the Arab tribes.<sup>12</sup> The IS slogan "to remain and expand" is based on the defeat of apostasy and the brave attacks on new areas (and financially important war booty).

In a long article in its French propaganda magazine "Dar al Islam" in May 2016, IS explains how it diligently follows in the footsteps of Abu Bakr and the companions of the Prophet.

It is thus necessary—today more than ever—to go back in time to the stories about our pious ancestors, the Prophet's companions, to analyze and compare their work with that of IS. Only by making this comparison can

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), pp. 200-210.



genuine seekers of the truth assure themselves that today, IS marches in the footsteps of the companions [...] Since the Caliphate is now being established, and all nations of infidelity and apostasy have joined forces to fight it, it is time to turn to the history of the Islamic conquests [...] In this article we invoke the battles led by Caliph Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, in particular the conquest of Iraq, which is the vital issue demanding our attention today.<sup>13</sup>

The main point of the article is that Abu Bakr chose to attack the much bigger and stronger Persian Sasanian Empire, which had expanded into what is currently known as Iraq, even though he was simultaneously engaged in the Ridda wars against the apostate tribes. So, he redirected his forces towards the north and the harbor town of Ubullah, and further on to al-Hirah, the major Persian city in Mesopotamia. Remaining and expanding at the same time was an enormous venture. But this unequal battle was a conscious strategy by Abu Bakr, because he knew that God would not allow the Ummah to be destroyed. In this way, Abu Bakr established the state and its true Muslims, who are Muja-hideen, and the false believers, the hypocrites, were eliminated. Using a criss-cross of various battles, Abu Bakr's speech to his soldiers and quotes from the IS ideologist Abu Muhammad Adnanis, the article demonstrates that IS is diligently following the strategy of Abu Bakr:

This is the secret of IS and its battles today. It never relies on its force or its preparation or its number. It relies fully on God, because only God can ensure victory: 'And there is no victory except from Allah, the All-Mighty, the All-Wise' ([Quran Surah 3] Al Imran, verse 126). The message from Abu Bakr as-Siddiq to his soldiers is the key to victory. Therefore, the commanders of IS have had no other choice than to send the same message to their soldiers. Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani said: 'Soldiers of IS, listen to these words. Have no fear for the Caliphate, because Allah (may He be exalted and praised) will protect and shape the Caliphate and the people who establish it. But have fear for yourself, fear for your souls, make them accountable in remorse and come back to your Lord.'<sup>14</sup>

The intention is to make IS soldiers fight against apostasy, and those who die fighting for this cause are promised admission to Paradise. The article gives examples of early conquests when individual warriors and small groups who, thanks to their contempt for death, defeated much larger hostile contingents. The moral of the article is precisely the IS moral: even today, wars are won by those who are not afraid of death, but who love it.

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<sup>13</sup> "L'état islamique sur les par des compagnons," *Dar al islam*, May 9, 2016, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

## Abu Qatada and the Prophet's wars

This last theme—that Islam will prevail because faithful Muslims have higher morals than other soldiers—is well-known in Islamist writings.<sup>15</sup> However, they see Jihad as a defensive war to protect, for instance, a Muslim Palestine.

The notion of Jihad as an offensive war and individual duty is a trademark of ideological Jihadism, whose spiritual father in the Arab world is Sayyid Qutb. In his sizable Quran commentary “In the Shade of the Qur’an” from 1958, Qutb develops the idea that the true believer must abandon the impious and barbarous society he was born into and the sinful life he has led. Qutb calls it *hijra*, the word also used about the Prophet Muhammad’s exodus from sinful Mecca to Yathrib, the city where the first Muslim society was founded. Like the Prophet, any Muslim must make his *hijra*, says Qutb, but only few—the avant-garde—did so. Because so few have realized the true Islam, we are still living in a ‘time of weakness,’ individually and collectively.

AQ and many of the movement’s ideologists have been inspired by the perception of the Prophet’s life as a model for the struggling believer and the Quran as a program (*minhaj*): They want to see the establishment of the Jihadist movement in Afghanistan as the *hijra* of the small group of believers, and the battles fought from there as a model of the battles the Prophet fought from Yathrib (which he named Medina) against the Muslims’ previous oppressors in pagan Mecca. The ideologists describe their various terrorist acts, including the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, as ‘raids,’ or *ghazwa*, which is the origin of the word “razzia,” and the word used by Muslim historians about Mohammad’s attacks on the caravans from Mecca.

Abu Qatada has written a review of the Prophet Muhammed’s raids, which is intended as an instruction for today’s Mujahideen. Over 732 pages in Arabic, he goes through the almost 20 large and small raids conducted by the Prophet during a period of nine years from 624 to his death in 632. This has been done before, based on biographies of Muhammad by Muslim historians. However, Abu Qatada’s idea is different because he focuses on verses in the Quran revealed in connection with the individual battles and on how God builds up the Ummah and each individual Muslim. The wars are stages in God’s program for the true believer, a divine formation of character.

Therefore, Abu Qatada devotes more than a quarter of the book to one particular raid, which ended in a defeat, namely the Battle of Uhud. The Muslims reacted differently when they were faced with a superior Meccan army; the warriors were unsettled, some went out too early, whereas others never went. It was a tough time for everyone, because the defeat at Uhud came after a miraculous victory at Badr, which had made the Muslims overly confident and careless. Abu Qatada is full of praise for the Battle of Uhud, because it led to a separation of the true believers and the hypocrites, and it offered an oppor-

<sup>15</sup> Sami E. Baroudi, “Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi on International Relations: The Discourse of a Leading Islamist Scholar (1926–),” *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 1 (2014): 2-26.

tunity for many warriors to achieve martyrdom. At Uhud, God made it clear that Jihad is life itself and the only way to bear testimony to God.<sup>16</sup> God revealed, among other things, the verse "Allah loves the steadfast" (Qur'an 3:146) because the battle was the greatest ordeal for the early Muslims. Patience does not mean tolerance, but steadfastness. It is not the humbleness of animals or subjects; it is the faithful, patiently waiting for the right opportunity.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Abu Qatada does not see Jihad as killing, but as part of a civilization process: the formation of a nation and a person. He ends his review by stating that Jihad is the deed of a nation; something one should be brought up in. Inspired by Sayyed Qutb, he states that only the mujahedeen will be free, because Jihad means liberation and self-liberation. Abu Qatada concludes by encouraging any young man who reads the review to confront his selfish soul and its bad excuses, and to choose the only thing that can save a human being, namely Jihad.<sup>18</sup>

One reason that Abu Qatada spends so much energy on the Battle of Uhud and speaks of it with gratitude is that this battle was the great ordeal which was needed to separate the "victorious group" from the true mujahedeen. However, another reason is that, in his interpretation, this is also where the Muslims are in the present day (the book was published in 2012). God is testing the Mujahideen in his great ordeal. They won a surprising victory over the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and they miraculously succeeded in attacking the biggest city in the US. But since then, the Americans have launched a counter-attack, Osama bin Laden has been assassinated, and yes, some Muslims have defected. Now more than ever, there is a need for high morals and contempt of death: the Mujahideen must love the ordeal imposed by God.

## Conclusion

IS and AQ are rivals in Syria, Yemen, North Africa and many other places. As described in other articles in this special issue, the two movements have different strategies in relation to the local Muslim populations, and different views on the use of extreme violence. Another main difference is that IS controls a well-defined territory which the movement claims to be a state with certain state functions. Many of the videos coming from IS do not show violence, but rather schools, courts, police, markets and obedient citizens. And this is another important difference: IS is deeply concerned with the coming of the Caliph and people pledging allegiance to him. If they do not, they are apostates and must be killed. As we have seen, this is one of the main differences from ideologists like al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada.

This chapter has dealt with the movement's notion of the caliphate and political authority, and the conception of history in which it is rooted. Again, the

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<sup>16</sup> al-Filastini, *al-Muqaraba li nazilat al-'asr*, p. 116.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 461.

contrast to AQ is evident. In AQ's ideology, the caliphate is a thing of the future that Muslims will realize one day, but it has not been the movement's primary focus. The faithful are still far too weak. Instead, they need to consolidate. They are like the very first Muslims who migrated from Mecca in the exodus led by Mohammed, and who started a prolonged war against the city. They are at a specific juncture in this war; in the slump following the Battle of Uhud and the defeat which separated the sheep from the goats. This was in 625.

IS, on the other hand, is mentally in 633. The Prophet is dead, Abu Bakr is the chosen one and has held his inaugural speech, and the rebellion of the Arab tribes has almost been defeated. The battle to be fought is not the Battle of Uhud, but the Battle of Ubullah, and after this comes the annexation of Iraq and the fall of the Persian Empire. Whereas in AQ's ideology the Muslims are fighting their way out of a state of weakness and are highly defensive, IS's ideologists find their movement to be in another position: they are remaining and on the verge of expanding, with great Muslim conquests. They have already minted their own currency, the dinar, and appointed governors for distant provinces. It is still a time of ordeal, and the Prophet is no longer alive. But God has created the victorious group, and now it is time to build the state and to expand.

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## Islamic State Enters Al-Qaeda's Old Hotbed: Afghanistan and Pakistan

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**Abstract:** The Islamic State (IS) movement has opened a new chapter in the Afpak region, changing the landscape of militant movements in the area. This article looks at the patterns of rivalry and collaboration between the Islamic State on one side and Al-Qaeda and Taliban-related movements on the other. It also surveys the way Al-Qaeda has developed during the past years where most of the international attention has been devoted to the formation of IS in Iraq/Syria, and shows that Al-Qaeda is still active, though it has become more locally oriented. Finally, the article looks at the prospects for the further expansion of IS especially in Pakistan where, on one side, a range of sectarian anti-Shia movements that resonate with parts of the IS agenda while, on the other side, there is no ideological tradition for embracing the kind of caliphate-jihadism that the IS advocates.

**Keywords:** Jihadism, Islamic State Khorasan, Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Afghanistan, Pakistan, terrorism.

### Introduction

Ten years ago, the borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan were the command post for leaders of Al-Qaeda (AQ). But what has happened with AQ since then? And what sort of collaboration or conflict is there between the dominant Taliban-related movement in the region, AQ, and the new kid in town – Islamic State (IS)? Below I look at the emergence of IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the dynamics that have impacted the relationship between the “old” movements in the region (Taliban and AQ) on the one hand, and IS on the other. IS is still a fledgling movement in the “afpak” region, and therefore there is still no clear picture of its influence and resonance in Afghanistan and

Pakistan. Because the situation is still unfolding, this article is based on very limited source material about the movement.<sup>1</sup>

## Islamic State Khorasan

In early 2015, the Islamic State movement opened a new chapter, operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The establishment of the new Afghan-Pakistani fraction of IS was announced by a central spokesman, Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani, from one of IS's headquarters in Syria. In an almost seven-minute-long speech, Al-Adnani announced that the group would be expanding to what he called "Khorasan."<sup>2</sup> Hence this fraction is referred to below as "ISK" (Islamic State Khorasan). The speech was published on 26 January 2015 in *Al-Furqan*, the IS media bureau. The announcement came a few weeks after a group of former Taliban supporters in Pakistan set up a so-called "Khorasan Council" (*shura*) and publicly declared their loyalty to IS.

The Afghan-Pakistani fraction is therefore closely linked to the IS movement that emerged in Iraq during 2013. The leadership of ISK has declared its loyalty (*bayah*) to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the self-appointed caliph, who surprised the world when he spoke about his mission at a mosque in Mosul in July 2014. While ISK has only a limited presence in Pakistan, today it is present in around seven Afghan provinces, primarily in the eastern part of the Kunar province and the adjacent Nangarhar province. The ISK has challenged the Afghan Taliban in both Nangarhar, Herat, and Helmand, but Eastern Nangarhar has emerged as the strongest base of IS presence in Afghanistan<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 1).

The movement has made its presence felt by taking responsibility for suicide attacks, armed operations and kidnappings, particularly in south-eastern Afghanistan, where ISK has unsuccessfully tried to occupy certain areas, but also in north-eastern Afghanistan, where the movement has been more successful. The ISK has also attacked Pakistani interests in Afghanistan, including a

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<sup>1</sup> The existing literature on IS mostly looks at IS' emergence in Iraq and its extension into Syria. There is a substantial amount of policy papers and reports on the subject (including publications by Brookings, Carnegie, International Crisis Group and DIIS). Books dealing with the rise of IS include e.g. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015); Charles R. Lister, *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2015); Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015); Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State – the Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi Books, 2015); William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The declaration, published on January 26, 2015 by *Al-Furqan*, the media agency of Islamic State, came only a few weeks after a group of former TTP representatives established a *shura* and declared allegiance to Al-Baghdadi.

<sup>3</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Blood and Faith in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2016), available at [www.brookings.edu/research/blood-and-faith-in-afghanistan-a-june-2016-update](http://www.brookings.edu/research/blood-and-faith-in-afghanistan-a-june-2016-update).



Figure 1: Map of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar. ISK has also been active in Pakistan, particularly with attacks in the Sindh province, and according to Pakistani news coverage, ISK has managed to gain supporters in the tribal areas of Pakistan (FATA), where the Pakistani Taliban still has its strongholds and where Al-Qaeda previously enjoyed widespread popularity and protection.

The new IS fraction is called ISIL-K (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan) on the US list of terrorists,<sup>4</sup> while it refers to itself as *Wilayat Khorasan*. *Wilayat* is a term referring to the independent administrative units existing under the historical caliphate system and therefore the name is sometimes translated to the “Khorasan province.” The Afghan-Pakistani fraction therefore considers itself as an administrative and military unit of the *global* Islamic caliphate, which became the ambition of the IS movement in 2013 when it expanded its activities in Iraq to include Syria.

According to reports from the United States Military Academy at West Point, the Afghan-Pakistani fraction of the movement was already under way in early 2014,<sup>5</sup> when former Al-Qaeda supporters in Afghanistan and Pakistan adhered to the notion that the Iraqi, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was the caliph, who will unite the Muslim world before the final apocalypse unfolds.

Note that, despite being called a “province,” Khorasan is not a territorial area. It makes more sense to consider it as a *movement* in Afghanistan and Pakistan that is endeavoring to realize the IS vision of an Islamic caliphate. Khorasan does not exist as a province any more, but it refers to an historical region covering parts of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and much of Iran. Some descriptions of the historical area also include parts on Pakistan. Legend has it that Khorasan also existed as a pivotal element in eschatological narratives of the final days leading up to the day of judgement. For example, a hadith [a report attributable to the words, actions or habits of the prophet Muhammad] that has been used to establish legitimacy for the IS movement, predicts that an army will rise up in the Khorasan area bearing a black banner. The Muslim messiah (known as imam Mehdi in the eschatology) will come forward from this army and lead the Muslims to final victory against the enemies of Islam, thus re-establishing the glory of Islam. An element in this hadith calls upon all Muslims to join the “army of the black banner” when it appears. The legend of Khorasan as an area in which decisive events will occur can also be found among Taliban supporters, although they do not recognize IS as the movement that will lead Islam to final victory.

ISK’s strongholds in Afghanistan are in the Kunar province in north-eastern Afghanistan and in the adjacent Nangarhar province (especially in the Achin district). Both these areas border with the tribal areas in Pakistan (FATA – Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Fig. 1). ISK is reported to have attempted to occupy the southern Farah, Helmand and Zabul provinces, although without

<sup>4</sup> Bureau of Public Affairs Department of State. The Office of Website Management, “Designations of Foreign Terrorist Fighters,” Press Release | Media Note, U.S. Department of State, September 29, 2015, available at [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/247433.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/247433.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Don Ressler, “Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan,” *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 3 (March 2015): 7-11, available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/situating-the-emergence-of-the-islamic-state-of-khorasan>.



success.<sup>6</sup> The ISK warriors comprise Afghans, Pakistanis and Uzbeks from the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), who have previously cooperated with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. A 2015 UN report described how ISK took over parts of the Nangarhar province by forcing 25 schools to close and by threatening teachers and parents (the schools were allegedly taken over to organize their military activities).

ISK is still so new that it is hard to say anything firm about the nature and structure of the movement. However, reports from journalists and news stories give some insight into the movement that is often perceived as AQ's "superior" with regard to their methods and dramatic use of violence.

### **IS move into Pakistan**

During 2015, it became clear that ISK was slowly encroaching on the Pakistani "jihad arena," partly because leading members of various Pakistani militant movements announced their allegiance to IS and Al-Baghdadi and because IS propaganda has been found in Pakistan. There have been reports about IS flags and pro-IS graffiti on walls in Karachi and Peshawar – both cities that were previously strongholds for Al-Qaeda sympathizers and supporters of the Taliban. In late 2015, there were also reports of IS propaganda videos being distributed in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and reports of a radio station being established called "The Voice of the Caliphate" (with programs in Arabic, Pashto, Farsi and Dari), although this was quickly closed down after US air strikes on the station's studio.<sup>7</sup>

In May 2015, a lethal attack on 46 Shia Muslims was linked to an IS-related movement in Karachi, which is located in the Sindh province. Jundullah—a group which had pledged allegiance to IS in November 2014—claimed responsibility for the clearly sectarian attack. Jundullah has previously been associated with the Pakistani fraction of the Taliban, but ideologically it is closer to IS and its mission to re-establish a transnational Islamic caliphate.

Again in 2015, 42 people were arrested in Sialkot (in the Punjab province) because they were allegedly part of an IS cell. In the Pakistani capital of Islamabad, a suspected Pakistani IS leader was arrested and accused of recruiting for the movement. The Pakistani media reported that the arrest also revealed that IS paid new recruits a monthly wage of USD 380 for joining the IS cause.<sup>8</sup> This amount has been reported as higher by other sources, but nevertheless, the wage has contributed to expanding IS' presence in Pakistan, especially in the

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<sup>6</sup> Franz J. Marty, "On the Trail of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, April 5, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/05/afghanistan-islamic-state-taliban/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Farhan Zahid, "Growing Evidence of Islamic State in Pakistan," *Terrorism Monitor* 14, no. 3 (February 2016): 3-5, available at [www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45065&cHash=547a6e0e90327659248b7108b3925ab0](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45065&cHash=547a6e0e90327659248b7108b3925ab0).

tribal areas, where thousands of young men and women live in harsh circumstances with unemployment and poor socio-economic conditions.<sup>9</sup>

The IS English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, recently brought an interview with “the governor (*wali*) of Khorasan,” where he says that Khorasan now comprises Afghanistan and western Pakistan, and that IS has ambitions to move into Kashmir (an area of contention between Pakistan and India). With regard to their foothold in the region, he says, “We have established judicial courts in these regions, offices for hisbah [a sort of religious police force], offices for zakah [charity/alms], and others for education, da’wah [proselytizing] and masjid [mosques], and public services.”<sup>10</sup> However, the activities he refers to are more about Afghanistan than Pakistan, from where there are only sketchy reports on the establishment of IS-related sharia courts or other types of parallel administration.

The umbrella organization for the Taliban in Pakistan, Tehrike Taliban Pakistan (TTP), is composed of whole movements that have joined the TTP, as well as smaller splinter groups from other movements, and ISK in Pakistan follows a similar pattern. As mentioned above, one of the movements that have publicly declared its allegiance to ISK is the anti-Shiite Jundullah movement. The Jundullah movement agrees with IS’ choleric portrait of Shia Muslims as “deniers” (*rafidah*), and claims that Shia Muslims do not recognize the Prophet’s successors, Abu Bakr and Umar, as legitimate caliphs, arguing that they are not merely defectors but a serious ideological threat to the true Islam and must be vanquished. Jundullah started as a movement of exiled Sunni Muslim Iranians who wanted to overthrow the Shia Muslim regime in Iran, and over time it has become more focused on combatting the “defectors” in Pakistan.

As mentioned above, another movement that has allied itself with ISK is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>11</sup> The IMU has been struggling to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan for many years from its exile in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and it has previously collaborated with AQ. It is likely that IS considers an alliance with the militant IMU as extremely valuable as, at least on paper, IS has ambitions to take over the historical Khorasan (much of which is in Central Asia) and thereby fulfil the prophecy in the *hadith* that is referred to in their propaganda and by the movements that have joined their struggle. In November 2015, however, the IMU was weakened by a clash with the Afghan Taliban and was further fragmented when, in June 2016, a small IMU group questioned the former leader’s loyalty to IS and instead declared loyalty to Al-Qaeda. Preliminary reports indicate that the ISK movement has also attracted warriors who previously fought for more locally based Pakistani movements such as Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkare Jhangvi. Both these groups are well known

<sup>9</sup> Marty, “On the Trail of the Islamic State in Afghanistan.”

<sup>10</sup> “Interview with the Wali of Khurasan,” *Dabiq* 13, pp. 48-58, quote on p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Merhat Sharipzhan, “IMU Declares It Is Now Part of the Islamic State,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/imu-islamic-state/27174567.html>.

for their anti-Shia sentiments and over the years they have been behind many militant attacks on Shia Muslims in different parts of Pakistan. In some cases, ISK warriors have a dual loyalty, meaning that they do not necessarily definitively leave the movement from which they came, but just join the cause for which they have most sympathy at any particular time.

Other movements that have seen a transfer of members to ISK include Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Tanzime Nifaze Shariate Muhammadi (TNSM), and the TTP. Despite this “defection” of members, the three movements are still intact and working to realize their own goals. Cooperation between parts of LeT and ISK is particularly based on personal relationships between IS leaders and LeT leaders in the tribal areas of Pakistan. There can be strategic and amicable reasons for temporary cooperation, that movements protect each other, or that they provide logistical assistance for each other, but complete absorption of LeT in ISK is hard to imagine, as LeT’s primary struggle has always been for Kashmir and directed towards their arch enemy: India. Since TTP was established in 2007, however, LeT has split and a small fraction has joined the TTP cause in the tribal areas in Pakistan, thereby turning their backs on the previous ties of loyalty to the Pakistani army. However, note that the LeT movement has never been driven by a vision to establish an Islamic caliphate, but in addition to its militant activities, it is a missionary movement to spread the teaching of Islam through what it considers as correct Islamic education and upbringing. In other words it believes in Islamization from the bottom up and, in contrast to other Islamic movements in Pakistan, it has never had a strong voice in discourses on the establishment of an Islamic state in Pakistan. Furthermore, LeT has an arch-nationalistic ethos (identified in its opposition to the Indian identity), and its fight has been for the border between India and Pakistan, which is hard to align with IS’ transnational caliphate project.

On the other hand, TNSM was established to Islamize the Pakistani state. Since 2007 it has primarily been associated with the Taliban, but even though it has fought for an Islamic state as a national project, the idea of an Islamic caliphate is not entirely remote for TNSM and it is not unthinkable that parts of the movement could be attracted by the IS idea that we are approaching the apocalypse. As a movement, TNSM has not yet pledged loyalty to Al-Baghdadi and primarily just individuals from the movement have joined ISK.

The former supporters of TTP who have joined ISK have done so because they were dissatisfied with the way the Taliban in Pakistan was developing. Some say that this reflects the leadership crisis that hit the Taliban when the TTP leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, was killed by the Americans in 2013. The critical TTP supporters, especially the original supporters based in the tribal areas, were never satisfied with the appointment of Mullah Fazlullah (who has no ties with the tribal areas) as the successor to Hakimullah Mehsud, who was not just the head of the Taliban in Pakistan but also a powerful tribal leader. The former members of TTP who have joined ISK have therefore lacked a leader in whom they have confidence. Moreover, the Taliban has been divided on the issue of

whether to enter into peace agreements with the Pakistani state, or whether such action would be a symbolic pact with an infidel system. Fragmentation of the Pakistani Taliban movement has also meant that some of the warriors in the movement have become disillusioned with the movement's lack of potency and it is very likely that as a result they have seen IS as a strong alternative.

### Is there room for IS?

The relationship between TTP in Pakistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan on the one hand, and IS on the other, has primarily been characterized by tension and internal power struggles, rather than cooperation and integration. In other words, as things stand now, IS and the Taliban cannot be considered as united or uniting, but more as competing movements that weaken each other by fighting against each other.

News of the death of Mullah Omar spread in the summer of 2015. Mullah Omar was a uniting force for both the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban who had sworn allegiance to him. Although, like Mullah Omar, Al-Baghdadi also went by the title "*Amir ul Momineen*" (leader of the faithful), Mullah Omar never claimed the status of caliph, reflecting that the Taliban remained a national project. Supporters of the Taliban movement therefore do not automatically recognize Al-Baghdadi or the legitimacy of the transnational caliphate project, and in many cases there have been statements in which the Taliban belittle the need for a movement like the IS. The main objective of the Taliban in Afghanistan today is to re-establish the emirate as it was in Afghanistan under the rule of Mullah Omar from 1996 to 2001. In Pakistan, the Taliban want to realize the vision they believe was behind the very foundation of Pakistan in 1947: the vision of an Islamic national state for Muslims in what was then India.

According to reports, there is currently open conflict between the Taliban and ISK, particularly in eastern Afghanistan. A recent Al-Jazeera documentary—*ISIL and the Taliban*—portrays the dynamics now impacting the relationship between the Taliban and ISK.<sup>12</sup> In one scene, for example, ten men are executed by ISK because they have cooperated with the Taliban. The documentary also shows how the Taliban in Afghanistan sees no need for a movement such as IS and how IS describes the Taliban as being in the pockets of Pakistani intelligence services and therefore not fighting an authentic struggle for Islam. The animosity between ISK and the Taliban is also evident in the propaganda issued by IS. In one interview, the governor of Khorasan describes the Taliban as a nationalistic movement that is not just in the pockets of the Pakistani intelligence, but which is also inspired by tribal tradition rather than the laws of God.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jamie Doran and Najibullah Quraishi, "ISIL and the Taliban," *Al-Jazeera*, November 1, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2015/11/islamic-state-isil-taliban-afghanistan-151101074041755.html>.

<sup>13</sup> "Interview with the Wali of Khorasan," p. 49.

The leadership of ISK is composed of defectors, i.e. former Taliban leaders (although not from the highest echelons in the hierarchy). In simple terms these are those who were dissatisfied with the overall leadership of the Pakistani Taliban and therefore decided to break away. Hence, they have a personal agenda in their actions against their previous fellow warriors. However, the Taliban movements remain much stronger than ISK, and preliminary observations estimate that approximately 1,000 men are linked to the ISK movement (mostly concentrated in Nangahar in Afghanistan and the tribal areas in Pakistan).<sup>14</sup> ISK is therefore not a strong player right now, but this can certainly change if more local movements join the black banners.

Looking at the Taliban movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan, neither of them have broken with the culture in which they have been entrenched and from which they have arisen. On the contrary, they have taken over some of the social structures in which leadership and loyalty depend on family and tribal bonds as well as the ability of the leader to provide safety and security for his foot soldiers and their families. For the same reason, the relationship between a foreign movement like IMU and the Taliban has never been very close, and it is very likely that cultural differences are too great between a movement like IS, with its transnational ethos, and the Taliban with its traditional society and tribal-specific hierarchies, and where personal relationships with the leaders are important.

There are significant internal differences and conflicts between the Taliban (both the Afghan and Pakistani) on the one hand, and ISK on the other, with ISK's strength being challenged in power struggles with the rivalling movements. Furthermore, IS comes with a new ideology that has not really received any support in Pakistan and Afghanistan before. The challenge facing ISK is firstly to get the existing militant movements to recognize Al-Baghdadi as the caliph and messiah figure and, secondly, to convince the existing movements that it is apocalypse now and that IS is the army with the black banner described in the mythological prophecies.

### **What about Al-Qaeda?**

The relationship between ISK and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan is just as tense as that between ISK and the Taliban. This can be seen in IS propaganda, where Al-Qaeda in Pakistan is portrayed as an extension of Pakistani intelligence in the same way as the Taliban.<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that the leadership of Al-Qaeda has been loyal to the spiritual leader of the Taliban since 2001. Osama bin Laden maintained the loyalty (bayah) he had sworn for

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<sup>14</sup> Bill Roggio, "State Department Lists Islamic State's 'Khorasan Province' as Foreign Terrorist Organization," *The Long War Journal*, January 14, 2016, available at <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/01/state-department-lists-islamic-states-khorasan-province-as-foreign-terrorist-organization.php>.

<sup>15</sup> "Interview with the Wali of Khurasan," p. 49.

Mullah Omar, and the AQ leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, reaffirmed that loyalty after the death of Osama bin Laden. When the death of Mullah Omar was announced, Al-Zawahiri swore loyalty to the successor, Mullah Mansour. Recently, after Mullah Mansour had been killed by the Americans, the regional chapters of AQ, i.e. AQAP, AQIM and the Al Nusrah Front issued a joint statement extolling the deceased *Emir*, and Zawahiri has subsequently pledged loyalty to the new leader of the Taliban, Hibatullah Akhundzada. Neither the Taliban nor Al-Qaeda have ever recognized Al-Baghdadi as a legitimate caliph; on the contrary they have issued several statements in which they confirm that their loyalty still remains with their own causes.

The original headquarters of Al-Qaeda were in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in the years following 2001 the international community concentrated on striking at the organization known at that time as Al-Qaeda Central (AQC). AQC referred to the central leadership and the counselling body (*shura*) in which the central decisions of the organization were made. The original core of Al-Qaeda is now significantly reduced and several observers have indicated that the original AQC and *shura* do not have the same power as before, and the movement is much more decentralized than at the start.<sup>16</sup> However, Al-Qaeda never left the region, even though falling media interest in Al-Qaeda and Afghanistan/Pakistan could leave this impression.

There is some debate as to the strength of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan today. In October 2015, the US attacked an Al-Qaeda encampment in Kandahar, and this sowed some doubt on the number of Al-Qaeda warriors American intelligence had previously said were left in Afghanistan (estimates ranged between 50-100 men).<sup>17</sup> There turned out to be more than 150 active AQ warriors in the camp in Kandahar alone.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, 338 attacks on Al-Qaeda have been recorded in 25 out of the 34 provinces in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2013, and this has provoked critical voices to question the official figures from the US authorities.<sup>19</sup> However, it remains difficult to put a concrete figure on the strength of Al-Qaeda, as a number of movements periodically cooperate with Al-Qaeda, and whether these should be included depends on the breadth of the definition of AQ.

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<sup>16</sup> Deb Riechmann, "Al-Qaida decentralized, but not necessarily weaker," *Associated Press*, June 1, 2014, available at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/al-qaida-has-changed-shape-it-weaker>.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Schmitt and David E. Sanger, "As U.S. Focuses on ISIS and the Taliban, Al Qaeda Reemerges," *NY Times*, December 29, 2015, available at [www.nytimes.com/2015/12/30/us/politics/as-us-focuses-on-isis-and-the-taliban-al-qaeda-re-emerges.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/30/us/politics/as-us-focuses-on-isis-and-the-taliban-al-qaeda-re-emerges.html).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "US Military Admits Al-Qaeda is Stronger in Afghanistan than Previously Estimated," *The Long War Journal*. April 13, 2016, available at <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/04/us-military-admits-al-qaeda-is-stronger-in-afghanistan-than-previously-estimated.php>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

A new branch of Al-Qaeda was set up in Pakistan in September 2014 – Al-Qaeda on the Indian Subcontinent *Al-Qaeda Bar-i-Sagheer* (AQIS). Ayman Al-Zawahiri announced the existence of AQIS, which was to operate in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. An AQIS spokesman later highlighted that the main objectives of AQIS are to combat the American presence, establish Islamic law in South Asia, bring an end to the occupation of Muslim countries, and defend an Afghanistan under the now deceased Mullah Omar. When the Pakistani army initiated military operations in northern Waziristan in the tribal areas of Pakistan, it seems that parts of AQIS moved to southern Afghanistan (Kandahar and Helmand), where they took control of some areas with the Taliban.

What is interesting about AQIS is that it is a regional movement (like AQAP and AQIM) that aims more at a local influence and to recruit locally. AQ has previously had a clearly Arabic ethos (with primarily Egyptians, Saudis, Yemenites and warriors from Libya), and in recent years it has been more open to local movements. Even though some analysts have indicated that the establishment of AQIS was primarily a response to the influence of ISK in the region, the movement also expresses an institutionalization of a development that had already taken place. For example, as long ago as 1992 it was known that Al-Qaeda was active with regard to Muslims in Myanmar who had been displaced by militant monks. The *Mahaz-e Islami* movement in particular has had ties to AQ going back several years, and it has groups of supporters in Myanmar, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

So far, the group has not organized many serious attacks, but it came into the spotlight when it took responsibility for an attack on Pakistani ships in Karachi, after which the group issued a statement that the attack was because American and Indian forces had infiltrated the Pakistani fleet and the attack was on the Americans and Indians, and not on Pakistan. Since then, several AQIS leaders have been hit in drone attacks.

## **Caliphate-Jihadism**

The Taliban in Pakistan primarily appeared as a reaction to military operations by the Pakistani army in the tribal areas and in the capital, Islamabad, where the Red Mosque was attacked by the army in 2007 after being linked to terrorism. As time passed, the Pakistani Taliban allied itself with the voices that, in a Pakistani context, had advocated that Pakistan should be an Islamic state (rather than merely a state for Muslims). Neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan have had strong groups advocating the establishment of a transnational Islamic caliphate across borders. On the contrary, both the original Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban (and most of the other militia fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan) have been strongly nationalistic movements, fighting for the “real Afghanistan” and the “real Pakistan,” i.e. they have been fighting to define the states' identity, law and administration.

ISK represents a transnational project that can be hard for local movements to embrace. However, the next couple of years will show whether ISK is able to



spread its ideological vision. Any success they have will depend in part on how polarized the war against the West becomes over the next few years. With greater military engagement against IS in Iraq and Syria (and a renewed risk that the military engagement returns to Afghanistan if ISK gets a firm foothold), there is a risk that the apocalypse could become a self-fulfilling prophesy and it will become easier to convince potential recruits that the Muslim world must unite against the “common enemy.”

Apart from the transnational project itself, the distinctive ideology of IS compared with the existing movements that have embraced jihad in Pakistan and Afghanistan is the ambition for a caliphate with violent jihad. Although Al-Qaeda’s propaganda does refer to the caliphate, and presents it as a desirable idea, establishment of a caliphate has never been the primary driving force for Al-Qaeda and it was only a marginal element in statements by Osama bin Laden and his successors. Neither has the notion of breathing new life into the caliphate been particularly popular among the militant organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In fact, the idea of a caliphate has been a marginalized view, born, in addition to Al-Qaeda, by the minor Hizb ut Tahrir movement in Pakistan, although this group has not encouraged violent jihad to achieve its goals.

The expansionist and violent caliphate-jihadism is therefore a new project that will require some time to incubate in the area. Furthermore, IS operates with the idea that it is fighting an offensive jihad that according to most of the militant movements in the region this can only be considered legitimate under a Muslim leader/commander. Even a movement such as the Taliban in Pakistan has only declared its jihad as defensive, as it lacks a Muslim leader who, according to general militant interpretations of jihad, will make it legitimate to lead an offensive-expansive war. Therefore, support for the offensive jihad requires that Al-Baghdadi is recognized as a caliph.

Since the Taliban is the most dominant military movement in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the doctrinal difference is also significant with regard to whether or not it is conceivable that the two movements can join to form a united front. While IS finds its thoughts and ideas from established Salafi authorities like Ibn Taymiyya, and has been inspired by the earlier Wahhabist tradition (before this merged with Saudi royalism) and one of the main Islamist ideologues, Sayyid Qutb, IS’ religious authorities are also present among new generations of younger ideologists (e.g. the 30-year-old Turki Al-Bin’ali), who combine Wahhabism with the caliphate idea and violent jihad.<sup>20</sup> The irony is that, although IS now legitimizes re-establishment of the caliphate, part of the motivation for the movement comes from a Wahhabism that historically started as caliphate-critical.

What these ideological and theological characteristics come to mean, and how successful ISK is in convincing the militant movements in the region to

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<sup>20</sup> Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, March 2015), available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state>.



swear loyalty to Al-Baghdadi, ally themselves with caliphate-jihadism and strike the final blow against the infidel, will become apparent over the next couple of years. If the movement cannot convince the militant movements that are active in the region, then they will continue an internal war to suppress their opponents, as is now reflected in the conflict between the Taliban and IS.

### **About the author**

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## Islamic State in Yemen – A Rival to al-Qaeda?

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**Abstract:** The Yemeni state has all but collapsed as the political transition that followed the popular protests in 2011 has been derailed. This has left Yemen without a functioning central government and thus provided a ripe context for the expansion of both al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State in Yemen. This article focuses on the balance of power between AQAP and Islamic State in Yemen. Yemen is an interesting case of the international competition between al-Qaeda and Islamic State as the branch of al-Qaeda in Yemen, AQAP, is one of the strongest. The article argues that AQAP has sought to establish stronger local ties by enmeshing itself with the still strong tribal structures in Yemen whereas IS has sought to carve out a place for itself in Yemen by challenging AQAP on its religious zealotry, particularly by deepening sectarian divisions in Yemen.

**Keywords:** Islamic State, Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP, Arab Spring, sectarianism.

### Introduction

In Yemen, most people know of a *hadith* where the prophet Mohammed is said to have proclaimed that faith and wisdom are Yemeni. Now this *hadith* is used to call attention to the lack of wisdom displayed by current political leaders, who are described as egotistical and power-hungry. This same *hadith* is also being used in a rhetorical dispute between al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State (IS) in Yemen, which since the beginning of 2015 have competed to represent Jihadism in Yemen. For instance, in issue seven of *Dabiq*, the IS English language magazine, it was used to underline the lack of

wisdom exhibited by al-Qaeda's (AQ) Yemeni leadership.<sup>1</sup> The principal target of the IS rhetoric is Harith al-Nadhari, a senior member of AQ in Yemen who publicly dismissed the expansion of the IS caliphate into Yemen. The most important criticism from IS is that AQ, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, is too indulgent towards Shia Muslims. In this way IS is seeking to disseminate a narrative that AQAP has 'allowed' the Houthis—who are described as a Shia sect in league with Iran and the USA—to expand their power base in Yemen since the Arab Spring. This narrative is itself embedded in another, larger narrative, according to which Yemen is an example of AQ's inability to defend Sunni Muslims.

Yemen is renowned for being the home of one of the most active branches of AQ, and thus occupies a central position within the AQ movement. In 2013, the then emir of AQAP, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who had previously been Osama Bin Laden's secretary, was appointed as Ayman Al-Zawahiri's second-in-command. Nasir al-Wuhayshi was killed in a drone strike in June 2015, but his successor, Qassim al-Raymi, was quick to affirm AQAP's continued loyalty to Al-Zawahiri and AQ. Yemen thus represents an interesting example of how IS is attempting to gain a foothold in an area in which a strong AQ organization is already established. IS was formally established in Yemen in November 2014, when the head of Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, accepted an oath of allegiance (*bayah*) from IS supporters in Yemen, which in the process became a province (*wilayat*) of Islamic State.<sup>2</sup> At that point in time, IS in all likelihood consisted of a relatively small number of individuals, of which the majority are thought to have been defectors from AQAP. IS has attempted to appeal to sections of AQAP who feel that AQAP has been too hesitant to increase the brutality of its methods and intensify the sectarian narrative which has proven popular after the collapse of the Yemeni state following the Arab Spring in 2011. In this article, the focus is on how IS and AQAP distinguish themselves from one another, the balance of power between the two organizations, and their relationship with one another.

## **The Arab Spring – The Collapse of the State of Yemen**

The Arab Spring reached Yemen at a time when Ali Abdullah Salih, the country's then president, was increasingly fighting to suppress growing dissatisfaction among large sections of the population. Under the slogans of the Arab Spring the hitherto isolated protests unified and grew until Yemen stood at the brink of civil war. At this point, the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), supported by the United Nations (UN), helped successfully avoid civil war by formulating a negotiated transfer of power where Salih was forced to hand over the presidency to his vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, but granted immunity and allowed to remain in Yemen as head of the former ruling party,

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<sup>1</sup> Abū Maysarah ash-Shāmī, "The Qā'idah of Adh-Dhawāhirī, and An-Nadhārī, and the Absent Yemenī Wisdom," *Dabiq*, Issue 6 (1436 Rabī' al-Awwal): 16-25.

<sup>2</sup> "Remaining and expanding," *Dabiq*, Issue 5 (1436 Muharram): 20-33.

the General People’s Congress (GPC).<sup>3</sup> In addition to the transfer of executive powers from Salih to Hadi, the transitional agreement, commonly referred to as the GCC Initiative, provided for an inclusive National Dialogue aimed at defining the future Yemeni state and providing input to a new Yemeni constitution. The National Dialogue Conference (NDC), a 10-month-long dialogue with the participation of 565 representatives from various segments of Yemeni society, including most political parties, youths and women, was described as a success by Yemen’s international partners. In particular, it was noted that the NDC had succeeded in bringing about political discussions between representatives of the existing political elite and groups which hitherto had not typically participated in the political process, including the Houthis. Simultaneously, the US intensified its drone campaign against AQAP with the full cooperation of president Hadi, and as recently as 2014, this willingness to cooperate led President Obama to praise Yemen as a model example in the fight against IS.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, while political representatives debated in the National Dialogue, the Houthi movement was engaged in armed conflict against members of the tribal and political elite north of the capital Sana’a. The Houthis, who are centered in the northern governorate of Sa’ada bordering Saudi Arabia (Fig. 1), have experienced decades of economic and political marginalization in Yemen. The Yemeni government and the Houthis, first led by Hussein al-Houthi and now by his son, Abd Malik al-Houthi, were engaged in six rounds of fighting from 2004 to 2010.<sup>5</sup> The decades of marginalization and fighting against the regime has shaped the Houthis into a battle-trained militia with little trust towards established elites in Yemen. This background helps understand how the Houthis—although the sectarian narrative, in which the Houthis are Zaydi, a distinct branch of Shia-Muslims residing principally in Yemen, has grown in importance—initially drew substantial support in the capital Sana’a through an agenda focusing on the lack of economic development and increasing corruption. The Houthis had some credibility as an alternative to the established elites, which many saw as having hijacked the transition. Initially, the Houthis emphasized that they merely wanted to ensure that the decisions of the National Dialogue were implemented, yet gradually they came to monopolize power. Through the course of the autumn of 2014, the political crisis in Yemen gradually escalated, while simultaneously groups such as AQAP succeeded in imbuing the crisis with an air of sectarianism.

<sup>3</sup> The Gulf Cooperation Initiative and the Agreement on the Implementation Mechanism for the Transition Process in Yemen in Accordance with the Initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Hadi was formally elected as president through a popular vote where he was the only candidate and took office on 21 February 2012 for a two-year transitional period.

<sup>4</sup> “Statement by the President on ISIL,” September 10, 2014, accessed January 15, 2017, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1).

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group, “The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa,” June 10, 2014, accessed January 15, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/huthis-saada-sanaa>.

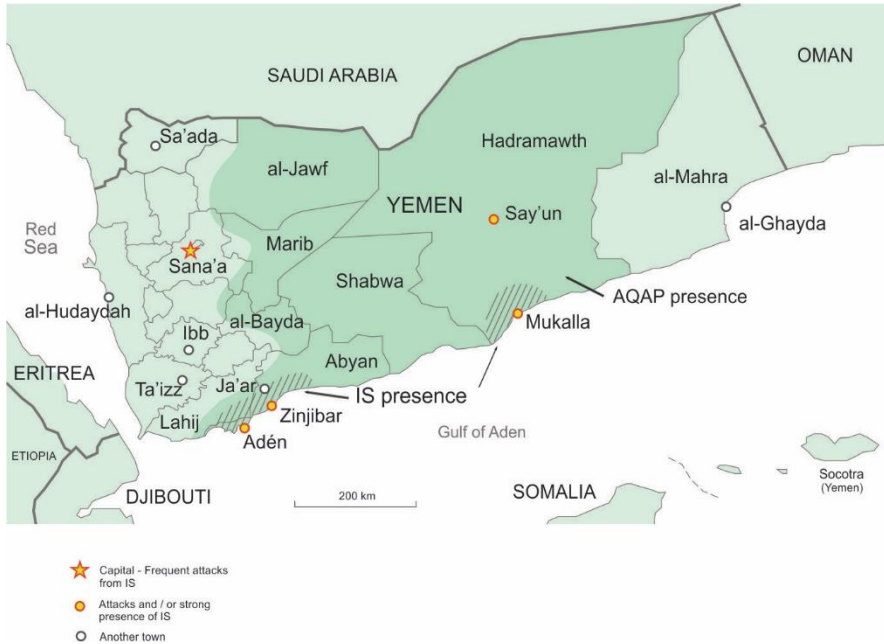


Figure 1: AQAP and IS presence in Yemen.

In March 2015, president Hadi was forced to flee Yemen. Shortly thereafter, at the request of president Hadi, the Saudi-led coalition began Operation Decisive Storm to restore peace and stability in Yemen.<sup>6</sup> It is in this context that Islamic State has attempted to gain a foothold in Yemen, while AQAP has exploited the collapse of the central government and focus on the Houthis from international players, particularly Saudi Arabia, to expand into south-eastern Yemen.

### AQ in Yemen – Exploiting Chaos

Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is the result of a merger between AQ in Saudi Arabia and Yemen in 2009 and has since then made a name for itself as one of the most active branches of AQ. AQAP has been pointed to as the biggest direct terrorist threat to the US and, among others, has been linked to the ‘underwear bomber,’ a Nigerian national who received training in Yemen prior to attempting to detonate a specially-designed bomb affixed to his underwear on a flight to Detroit in December 2009, and most recently to the at-

<sup>6</sup> UN Doc S/2015/217. See also, “Video: Saudi Ambassador in U.S. speaks on military campaign in Yemen,” March 26, 2015, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/webtv/reports/2015/03/26/Video-Saudi-ambassador-in-U-S-speaks-on-military-campaign-in-Yemen.html>.

tack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in January 2015.<sup>7</sup> This has led the terrorism researcher, Thomas Hegghammer, to describe AQAP as possessing one of the most ambiguous enemy hierarchies of all the current Jihadist organizations, encompassing both domestic and international enemies by combining attacks against Western targets, in particular the US, with focus on local issues and attacks against the Yemeni regime.<sup>8</sup> AQAP's attacks against international targets have raised its profile beyond the borders of Yemen, but the key to understanding the success of AQAP in Yemen lies in the organization's internal relations and its interactions with the Yemeni regime and other local groups.

AQAP's leadership is made up of experienced jihadists with decades of experience of armed warfare. The current emir, Qassim al-Raymi, received training in Afghanistan in the 1990s, after which he returned home to Yemen where he was imprisoned in 2004 for plotting an attack against various Western embassies. In 2006, together with the former emir of AQAP, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, al-Raymi was part of a group of 23 inmates who broke out of one of Yemen's most secure prisons. This prison break breathed new life into AQ in Yemen. There has subsequently been a great deal of speculation as to whether the prison break may have been carried out with the aid of insiders within the prison organization, and that accordingly the Yemeni regime must have had knowledge of the imminent escape. Officially, the Yemeni regime worked together with the US in the War on Terror, but Salih did not necessarily view AQAP as a threat to the same degree as the US authorities. Nonetheless, Salih was aware that the military and economic aid the US provided to Yemen principally relied on the US belief that AQ constituted a terror threat. In Yemen it is widely held that Salih created or allowed AQAP to thrive in order to secure US economic and military aid. This aid was partly used to establish elite military units who were loyal to Salih personally.

AQAP is not a homogenous organization, but there has been a general focus on ensuring that the group is locally anchored. This anchoring has particularly happened through *Ansar al-Shari'a* (supporters of Shari'a), which is often described as a subgroup of AQAP and as having been established to overcome the negative associations evoked in Yemen by the name AQ.<sup>9</sup> *Ansar al-Shari'a* focusses on domestic issues in Yemen, such as improving infrastructure by repairing roads, establishing electricity networks and distributing food, as well as restoring security to the country and reinstating law courts based on Shari'a

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<sup>7</sup> Gregory D. Johnson, "AQAP in Yemen and the Christmas Day Terrorist Attacks," *CTC Sentinel*, Special Issue (January 2010): 1-4.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups," *Current Trends in Islamist ideology* 7 (2009): 26-44.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory D. Johnson, *The Last Refuge. Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America's war in Arabia* (New York: Norton, 2014), 272.

law in areas in which the government has no presence or influence.<sup>10</sup> While AQAP continues to focus on Western targets and spreading religious jurisprudence, *Ansar al-Shari'a* focusses to a far greater degree on winning local support by verbalizing and solving the practical problems faced by ordinary people.

In this way, AQAP has been able to achieve a certain degree of support from local tribes. AQAP's strategy is based on pragmatic acknowledgment that its success depends on local tribes accepting its presence. Despite the fact that tribal structures in Yemen have weakened, tribal leaders still have a central role and influence which can serve to facilitate or obstruct the spread of AQAP – and likewise IS. On several occasions, AQAP has exploited the fragmentation of the Yemeni army following the transition of government in 2011 in order to plunder military installations, with the spoils being used to establish territorial control over larger or smaller areas. In 2011, AQAP took control of several towns and regions in two provinces in south-eastern Yemen: Abyan and Shabwa, including the regional capital, Zinjibar. This was accomplished without significant resistance because AQAP has traditionally had its main base of operations in these areas, and because of the almost complete absence of governmental institutions there. In 2012, the Yemeni army, supported by US drone strikes, regained control of these areas. Yet despite the fact that the Yemeni military formally took control, the Yemeni government was by no means able to ensure security in the area or the provision of basic amenities.

The Houthis took control of the capital Sana'a in September 2014 and from then on put President Hadi under steadily increasing pressure until he and his government stepped down in January 2015. In February, Hadi fled to the southern coastal town of Aden, and subsequently to the capital of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh, after the Houthis commenced their assault on Aden. On 24 March 2015, he asked the UN Security Council to pass a resolution which would pave the way for the establishment of a coalition of states willing to intervene against the Houthis in Yemen. A short time previously he had also asked the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for immediate support, including military intervention, in order to beat back the Houthis. On March 26th, operation 'Decisive Storm' began. This was a military intervention carried out by a coalition led by Saudi Arabia, with logistical and intelligence support from the US and the United Kingdom. The Houthis' seizure of power, followed by the Saudi-led military intervention, resulted in the almost complete collapse of the Yemeni state, which presented AQAP with a prime opportunity to expand its sphere of influence. In April 2015, AQAP seized control of the strategically-important coastal town of Mukalla, which is Yemen's fifth-largest city and a key point of access for Yemen's oil industry. AQAP assumed control of Mukalla more or less unchallenged until May 2016, when the city was reconquered, primarily by troops from the United Arab Emirates. However, there are credible

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Swift, "Arc of Convergence: AQAP, Ansar al-Shari'a and the Struggle for Yemen," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 6 (June 2012): 1-6.

accounts that indicate that AQAP withdrew without putting up any real resistance as a result of negotiations by local community leaders.<sup>11</sup> In this way AQAP retained its operational capacity while being able to claim that it took the moral high ground by retreating and thereby avoiding a bloody and destructive battle in Yemen's fifth-largest city.

Nevertheless, although AQAP currently exerts more influence in Yemen than at any previous point in the country's history, this does not change the fact that, by all accounts, AQAP has limited public support from the people of Yemen. Opinions vary as to AQAP's numerical strength, but the organization probably consists of at most a few thousand members with links to a network of more loosely associated individuals and tribes, whose support to AQAP is primarily based upon a pragmatic assessment of possibilities for economic and political gain rather than genuine support for AQAP's overall cause.<sup>12</sup> In a context where the Yemeni government is largely absent, local groups in some instances choose or are forced to accept AQAP's presence to the extent that the organization is able to improve security in the area, introduce a form of law and order, and offer basic local amenities such as water and electricity. There are, however, also Yemenis who support AQAP on the basis of AQAP's resistance to the Yemeni regime's collaboration with the US and in particular its drone policy. Yemen has seen more drone strikes since 2011 than almost any other country.<sup>13</sup> Yet, although a number of AQAP leaders and notorious members of the organization have been killed—such as US citizen Anwar al-Awlaqi in 2011, who played a central role in spreading propaganda via the Internet by establishing the organization's first English-language magazine *Inspire*—AQAP has established a structure which is independent of individual leaders. The organization has thus been able to replace the leaders who have been killed, while the drone program serves to legitimize AQAP's continuing campaign against US interests and the Yemeni regime.

## Islamic State in Yemen

Islamic State is a newcomer in the Yemeni context, having officially established itself in the country at the end of 2014. As reported in an account presented in issue 5 of *Dabiq*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi recognizes Yemen as a province (*wilayat*) of Islamic State.<sup>14</sup> In the view of IS, this means that all existing organiza-

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<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Kendall, "How can al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula be defeated?", *Washington Post*, May 3, 2016, accessed January 16, 2017, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/03/how-can-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-be-defeated/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/03/how-can-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-be-defeated/).

<sup>12</sup> Alexandra Lewis, "Unpacking Terrorism, Revolution and Insurgency in Yemen: Real and Imagined Threats to Regional Security," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 5 (2013): 77-92.

<sup>13</sup> The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, *Drone Strikes in Yemen*, accessed February 26, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war/yemen>.

<sup>14</sup> "Remaining and expanding," *Dabiq*, Issue 5 (1436 Muharram): 20-33.



tions and groups in Yemen, including AQAP, are illegitimate and should submit to IS. The complete absence of a functioning state, combined with escalating violence and severe poverty and the fact that Yemen occupies a key strategic position on the Arabian Peninsula with a 1,800 km long border with Saudi Arabia, make it an obvious area of interest for IS. IS seeks to undermine Saudi Arabia's legitimacy as a protector of Islam's holy sites by describing the Saudi regime and its associated religious scholars as having strayed from the true faith.<sup>15</sup> Yemen is therefore an obvious starting point for a more comprehensive military campaign on the Arabian Peninsula.

To begin with, a relative silence surrounded IS in Yemen. It was not until March 2015 that IS carried out a major attack. This attack was so significant, however, that it secured international attention. On Friday, 20 March IS carried out a coordinated suicide bombing of two mosques in Sana'a. The mosques which were mainly used by Zaydis, which is to say the form of Shia Islam practiced in Yemen which overlaps with the Houthi movement. Over 130 people died in the attacks. It is worth noting that AQAP immediately distanced itself from the attacks by making reference to the instructions set out by Ayman al-Zawahiri that religious sites must not be attacked.<sup>16</sup> IS responded by describing AQAP as having a 'two-faced nature' and being guilty of double standards, since AQAP had earlier carried out an attack on a public pro-Houthi rally.<sup>17</sup>

Since then, IS has not carried out a suicide bombing on civilians on a similar scale, but the IS *Wilayas* in Sana'a, Aden-Abyan and Hadramawth have been active since the spring of 2015. To begin with, IS was particularly active in Sana'a, carrying out attacks on targets associated with the Houthi movement, including a number of attacks on mosques. Most recently, IS has concentrated on carrying out a series of attacks in southern and south-eastern Yemen, targeted at governmental institutions. In October 2015, IS attacked the al-Qasr Hotel, where members of Hadi's government in exile had established temporary headquarters. This led the then prime minister to leave Aden. In December 2015, IS assassinated the newly appointed governor of Aden, Jaafar Mohammed Saad, in a car bomb attack. These attacks underline president Hadi's lack of control over not only the country, but even over his own self-proclaimed temporary capital. It also demonstrates that IS has grown in strength under the smokescreen of the current conflict, with the focus of international powers concentrated on the Houthi movement – certainly up until the spring of 2016. Recently, IS has increasingly turned to undermining the security situation in southern Yemen. IS has targeted recruitment centers for the Yemeni army, including multiple attacks in Aden where at least 45 people were killed on 23

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<sup>15</sup> "Kill the Imams of Kufr," *Dabiq*, Issue 13 (1437 Rabi' al-Akhir): 6-8.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Jocelyn, "Analysis: Why AQAP quickly denied any connection to mosque attacks," *The Long War Journal*, March 20, 2015, accessed January 16, 2017, [www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/analysis-why-aqap-quickly-denied-any-connection-to-mosque-attacks.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/analysis-why-aqap-quickly-denied-any-connection-to-mosque-attacks.php).

<sup>17</sup> "Soldiers of terror," *Dabiq*, Issue 8 (1436 Jumada al-Akhirah): 18-19.

May as they queued to enlist and more than 60 were killed on 29 August. Similar attacks have been carried out in other cities such as Mukalla, where 25 army recruits were killed in May under similar circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

Yet despite the fact that IS clearly has the ability to carry out attacks in Yemen, it is estimated that it has fewer active members than AQAP, and that IS is less integrated into Yemeni society compared with its rival. While there are no reliable figures to confirm this, it is estimated that IS consists of a few hundred active members, with a hard core primarily made up of defectors from AQAP.<sup>19</sup>

IS in Yemen has a centralized structure, *Wilayat* Yemen, but in addition consists of a number of *sub-Wilayats*, which identify themselves by adopting the names of existing provinces, such as *Wilayat* Hadramawth or *Wilayat* Sana'a. Officially, there are as many as ten different *Wilayats* in Yemen, but several of these have only been active to a limited extent, while the majority of IS attacks have been carried out in Sana'a, Abyan-Aden and Mukalla. In its organizational structure, IS is characterized by a greater degree of centralized authority and only limited acceptance of local autonomy. This has proved challenging to combine with the well-developed tradition of local autonomy and strong local identities that pertain in Yemen. For this reason, IS in Yemen, to a greater extent than AQAP, is perceived as a foreign organization and has not succeeded to date in integrating substantially with local tribal structures; indeed, it may not actively be seeking to do so. The Saudi-led military intervention has worsened the existing security vacuum in Yemen, and at the same time the Houthis' increasingly brutal methods have given the IS sectarian focus an increasing relevance. However, despite these factors, IS does not appear to have become a key player in Yemen. Moreover, within *Wilayat* Yemen, there has been criticism of IS' local leadership. This came to a head in December 2015, when more than 100 members, including several core members of IS, officially sought to replace the organization's regional leader (*Wali*) for Yemen.<sup>20</sup> It is not certain to what extent IS possesses a functioning centralized chain-of-command in Yemen, and there are various theories as to the identity of its regional leader. This is perhaps due to the fact that the IS leadership is thought to consist chiefly of Saudis, among them Abu Bilal al-Harbi, a.k.a Nasser al-Ghaydani, who has been mentioned as possibly being the unpopular regional leader. The discontented IS

<sup>18</sup> Katherine Zimmerman and Jon Diamond, "Challenging the Yemeni State: ISIS in Aden and al Mukalla," *Critical Threats*, June 9, 2016, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/zimmerman-diamond-challenging-yemeni-state-isis-in-aden-al-mukalla-june-9-2016>.

<sup>19</sup> Sami Aboudi, "Insight – In Yemen Chaos, Islamic State grows to rival al Qaeda," June 30, 2015, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-yemen-security-islamicstate-insight-idUKKCNOPA1T320150630>.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "More Islamic State members reject governor of Yemen Province," *FDD's Long War Journal*, December 28, 2015, accessed January 16, 2017, [www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/more-islamic-state-members-reject-governor-of-yemen-province.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/more-islamic-state-members-reject-governor-of-yemen-province.php).

members affirmed their loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and thus the rejection of the IS leadership in Yemen should not be interpreted as a rejection of IS in its entirety. The criticism of the IS leader in Yemen was rejected by the IS central command and appears to have led to the exclusion of a number of members, but it is not clear what consequences the dissatisfaction within the organization will have for IS in Yemen.

IS has sought to gain a relative advantage over AQAP by intensifying the sectarian aspect of the current civil war in Yemen and escalating the brutality against the Houthis as well as against Yemeni security forces. IS has focused on suicide bombings and publication of various propaganda materials—which are professionally produced but do not necessarily require the resources of a particularly large organization—not to have the local Yemeni population as their primary readership. It is likely that, up to now, IS has functioned with a relatively high degree of international involvement, but this may change if IS succeeds in creating an image for itself as a more dynamic organization than AQAP.

### The relationship between AQAP and IS

This section focuses on how IS distinguishes itself from AQAP and on the relationship between the two organizations. IS has sought to make a name for itself by attacking AQAP in two areas in particular: AQAP's more pragmatic approach to winning local support by focusing on setting up various local initiatives and initially displaying a small degree of flexibility with respect to the implementation of *shari'a* law; and AQAP's somewhat less brutal treatment of Yemen's Zaydi population in particular.

To begin with, AQAP adopted a relatively cautious approach to the IS declaration of *Wilayat* Yemen so as to avoid direct confrontation. For instance, on several occasions IS has been critical of AQAP in *Dabiq*, while AQAP has not mentioned IS in *Inspire*. This may reflect internal tensions within AQAP, which to a certain extent overlap with a generational divide, as a group of primarily younger members of AQAP have been inspired by IS successes in Syria and Iraq and have accordingly advocated a more aggressive strategy on the part of AQAP. AQAP has blamed IS for sowing discord between Muslims, but has otherwise been reserved in its criticism of IS. However, there is nothing to suggest that AQAP has any intention of dissolving itself in order to amalgamate with IS, and thus there will be a growing potential for conflict between IS and AQAP if IS continues to expand its activities in Yemen.

IS does not recognize AQAP as a legitimate organization in Yemen and has repeatedly attacked AQAP for compromising with respect to *shari'a* law. This is the case both domestically within Yemen and in international IS publications. For instance, issue 10 of *Dabiq* contains an account of how AQ in Yemen has chosen a different path to IS inasmuch as AQAP prioritizes “building ties with local groups and refraining from a strict application of *Shari'h*, the legal code of Islam.” The article is accompanied by an aerial view of the city of Mukalla,

which AQAP at one time controlled, with the caption: “*The City of Al-Mukalla in Yemen, where al-Qāi’dah made no effort to implement the Shari’ah after seizing control.*”<sup>21</sup> IS does not control any territory in Yemen. However, in southern Yemen, where it has been most influential, IS has attempted to bring about a more strict interpretation of *shari’a* by means of threats and intimidation. For instance, IS has threatened to attack Aden University unless gender-segregated teaching is introduced.

AQAP has repeatedly managed to seize control of more or less extensive areas of Yemen, but this is more by virtue of the total collapse of the Yemeni state than of AQAP having developed a durable strategy for progressing from insurgency to maintaining territorial control. It is nonetheless illustrative of the balance of power between IS and AQAP that IS is (still) unable to seize control of territory in the same manner as AQAP. However, since October 2015 there has been an increase in insurgency activity, in particular in *Wilayat Abyan-Aden* and *Wilayat Hadramawth*, which may indicate the increasing influence of IS.<sup>22</sup> This also means that, while the Houthis were initially the primary IS target, attacks are now aimed primarily on Yemen’s security forces and politicians associated with president Hadi.

IS has moreover exploited the Houthi seizure of power in September 2014 and their subsequent attempt to gain control of Yemen in its entirety, to polarize the sectarian divide between Zaydis and Sunni Muslims in Yemen. The sectarian narrative is built on an inter-regional mistrust, which has its roots in the relationship between northern Yemen, where most Zaydis reside, and southern Yemen, which is predominantly Sunni. The Zaydis make up approximately 30-35 % of Yemen’s population. IS has challenged AQAP’s self-appointed role as protectors of Sunni Muslims by calling attention to the fact that AQAP actions do not live up to their rhetoric, and by pointing out that IS would not have allowed the Houthis to achieve such leverage in Yemen. This is a crucial point, given that both organizations use religious legitimacy as a way of justifying their actions. AQAP is seeking to strike a balance between al-Zawahiri’s precept that it must avoid excessive civilian casualties, while at the same time not presenting IS with the opportunity to position itself as the true defender of Sunni Muslims. In this way the sectarian narrative has become increasingly significant in Yemen.<sup>23</sup>

IS plays a role in the escalation of violence in Yemen through its more uncompromising approach to the local population. This appeals to certain elements within AQAP who are of the opinion that AQAP has been too cautious

<sup>21</sup> “In the Words of the Enemy,” *Dabiq*, Issue 10 (1436 Ramadan): 67.

<sup>22</sup> Helene Lavoix, “Understanding the Islamic State system – Wilayat and Wali in Yemen,” *The Red (Team) Analysis Society*, February 22, 2016, accessed January 16, 2017, <https://www.redanalysis.org/2016/02/22/yemen-islamic-state/>.

<sup>23</sup> Elisabeth Kendall, “Al-Qa’ida and Islamic State in Yemen: A Battle for Local Audiences,” in *Jihadism Transformed: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State’s Global Battle of Ideas*, ed. Simon Staffell and Akil Awan (London: Hurst Publishers, 2016), Chapter 4.

and pragmatic. On account of this, IS has attracted defectors from AQAP. As a consequence, AQAP has likewise resorted to increasingly brutal methods and turned up the sectarian narrative, but it is also possible that the leadership of AQAP is not in full control of all sections of the organization, and that operations which appear to imitate the IS *modus operandi* are being carried out by followers of AQAP who have been inspired by IS propaganda videos. For example, this appears to be the case in the beheading of 14 soldiers in southern Yemen in August 2014.

The leadership of AQAP has in general sought to distance itself from the use of the extreme violence which characterizes IS activities, as this is considered to be a better long-term strategy for winning local support. For instance, in *Sada al-Malahim*, AQAP's Arabic language magazine which was published from 2008 to 2011, it was stated that a *mujahid* should abort an operation which would lead to the shedding of Muslim blood – an act which cannot be legitimized by reference to overriding rationales.<sup>24</sup> This is a strategy which AQAP has developed over a long period of time, and one which manifested itself in December 2013, for instance, when AQAP carried out an attack on the Yemeni ministry of defense, which was alleged to house a drone command center. The same building complex housed a hospital, and when videos subsequently began to circulate showing the brutal shooting of healthcare workers and patients, AQAP apologized. It is not uncommon to hear Yemenis distance themselves from extremely violent attacks or attacks on civilians by claiming that the bulk of these attacks are carried out by 'foreign fighters.' This serves to illustrate the fact that many Yemenis struggle to reconcile Yemeni values with the actions of these organizations.

## Conclusion

There has long been a tradition in Yemen of the political elite, especially the former president Salih, exploiting the threat of AQ in order to secure Yemen access to military support – principally from the US. In the wake of the collapse of the Yemeni government, AQAP has expanded its sphere of influence, but simultaneously it faces a challenge in the form of a newly established IS organization, which seeks to capitalize on the current political chaos in Yemen by bringing about an escalation of violence. In this context, it is important that international powers do not indirectly overstate the threat of IS in Yemen, as has happened in the case of AQAP, and thereby give the Yemeni political elite a reason to present IS as a greater international threat than it in fact is.

While suicide bombings continue to be the primary IS strategy, several of these attacks have required additional resources and thus appear to indicate

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<sup>24</sup> Sada al-Malahim, no. 11 "Sunnat al-Ightiyal" (The Sunna (religious) ruling of Assassination). See Michael Page, Lara Challita, and Alistair Harris, "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: Framing Narratives and Prescriptions," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 2 (2011): 159.

that IS may be in the process of consolidating its presence in Yemen. However, this does not change the fact that AQAP continues to be the dominant force in Yemen. AQAP's power base is rooted in the organization's ability to present itself as a means of achieving redress for areas which experienced decades of marginalization under Salih's regime. Thus, the best way to understand AQAP's strength and capacity for survival in Yemen is to consider the manner in which AQAP is able to verbalize and co-opt key local issues. IS, to a greater extent than AQAP, has a centralized command structure which has mainly attracted defectors from AQAP who are dissatisfied with AQAP's more protracted style of building up a terrorist organization. At the same time, IS in Yemen has prospered from the widespread narrative of IS as a victorious organization.

It is difficult to predict the future of IS in Yemen. IS is a direct rival to AQAP, but while rhetorical exchanges between the two groups have at times been pointed, they have yet to escalate into direct confrontation. However, it is conceivable that this will change if IS expands its activities in Yemen. At the same time, there is no doubt that the current civil war and the Saudi-led military intervention have exacerbated political and sectarian divisions to the point that both AQAP and IS have good opportunities to prosper in Yemen.

## About the author

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## Islamic State's Incursion into North Africa and Sahel: A Threat to al-Qaeda?

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**Abstract:** The article examines Islamic State's expansion into North Africa and Sahel and the subsequent rivalry between Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb – the regional Al Qaeda group. Although IS managed to establish a province in Libya from 2014 through 2016, its presence in North Africa and Sahel (Libya, Sinai, Nigeria) is fragile. AQIM in contrast has a longstanding presence in the region, which appears to be much more consolidated. The rivalry between IS and AQ in this region has incited AQ splinter-groups to unite around AQIM, and in 2016 these groups stepped up their attacks on Western targets.

**Keywords:** Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Islamic State, Sinai Province, Boko Haram, terrorism, Libya, North Africa, Sahel.

### Introduction

At the present time, the attention of the world's media is focused sharply on Islamic State's (IS) activities in Iraq and Syria, where IS has come under increasing pressure. A broad coalition of countries is at present attempting to combat IS in Iraq and Syria, and more specifically in the towns of Mosul and Raqqa. However, IS has not only established a presence in these countries. In contrast to al-Qaeda (AQ), which up until now has pursued a strategy of establishing small local "emirates," the IS Caliphate is a political entity aiming at encompassing the entire Muslim world. Since the inception of the Caliphate was proclaimed in the summer of 2014, IS has sought to expand its activities by establishing so-called "provinces" (*wilayat*) in other regions, and "expansion" has itself become a kind of ideological code word. Thus, local IS groups have sprung up in various places in Asia, the Caucasus and certain parts of Africa. However, the interesting aspect of this is not only IS' geographical expansion, it is also in



particular the manner in which this expansion has played out with respect to the various local AQ groups which were already present in the various regions. Has IS' move into these areas led to rivalries, cooperation or a kind of *modus vivendi* between IS and AQ? And is there indeed any significant difference between IS' and AQ's methods and projects, or are they simply two sides of the same coin? In order to shed light on these questions this article places sharp focus on a particular geographical area—North Africa and Sahel (Figure 1)—and sketches a picture of the effect IS' move into this region has had on regional security dynamics, and what implications this development has for the threat to Western targets.

### Territorial expansion of IS in North Africa and Sahel

In the summer of 2014, the leader of Islamic State, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, announced the re-establishment of the classical Islamic Caliphate. The Caliphate is a political entity to which all Muslims are in principle subject, and which thus aims to encompass the entirety of the historical Islamic territory stretching from Morocco to Indonesia. Against this background, it comes as no surprise that, shortly after its establishment in Iraq and Syria, the new Caliphate began to expand beyond these regions, and from the very beginning North Africa was at the top of IS' ambitions. As early as in the first editions of the IS magazine *Dabiq*, leading IS spokesmen emphasized not only the mantra "expansion," but also the outstanding qualities of nearby Libya.<sup>1</sup> Not so surprisingly, then, the first official IS province outside of Iraq and Syria was the Libyan city of Derna, which in October 2014 was annexed to the Caliphate under the name "the Derna province." A month after this de facto annexation of Derna, Baghdadi published an official list of all new IS provinces. Besides enclaves in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, three North African provinces appeared on this list: Derna, Sinai and a province of Algeria. In 2015 and 2016 IS propaganda urged prospective foreign fighters to choose Libya over Syria and Iraq if they had ambitions of becoming affiliated to IS. Consistent with the increasing problems it has had with maintaining its territories in Syria and Iraq, IS has long regarded Libya as a potential new front where it could exploit the fragile political situation and establish itself close to the borders of Europe.

Outside of its principal territories in Iraq and Syria, Libya has long been one of IS's most secure strongholds. There are no precise figures indicating the extent of IS' presence in Libya, but in 2015 a UN report estimated that, at one point in time, there were 3-5,000 IS fighters in Libya. In 2016, US intelligence sources estimated this figure to be 6,500, while the French national newspaper *Le Monde* placed the figure at a more conservative 5,000. The bottom line here is that there are no reliable figures to be had. The Caliphate's principal presence in Libya has long been in the so-called "Sirte province" around the coastal town of Sirte, but IS, which in December 2016 was forced to flee the area, has

<sup>1</sup> "From Hijrah to Khilafah," *Dabiq*, no. 1 (July 2014), p. 36.



also established smaller enclaves, for example in Tripoli and Sabratha. A significant IS province has likewise been established on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. However, Sinai aside, IS' presence in the region is generally more sporadic. In 2015 the militant Nigerian group, Boko Haram, affiliated itself with IS and in connection with this accepted the change of name from Nigeria to "the West African province." In addition to this, a large number of small factions from the entire region have sworn allegiance (*baya*) to IS, but such declarations of support often prove to be unstable and are soon retracted if circumstances change.

In some cases, the spread of IS into North Africa/Sahel was panned as a *top-down* strategy whereby the Caliphate has sent individuals to the region in order to establish territorial enclaves. In the majority of cases, however, the strategy has been that local groups have declared their loyalty to Baghdadi and in so doing have spontaneously chosen to affiliate themselves with IS. Concurrent to IS experiencing success on the battlefield, proclaiming the inception of the Caliphate and beginning to disseminate its violent propaganda videos, many militant IS groups in North Africa and Sahel have chosen to affiliate themselves with IS at their own initiative. However, this is mostly a case of complex, dynamic processes, whereby militant groups initially announce their support for IS and thereafter in some cases establish a more formal relationship with high-ranking IS emirs – if not outright official recognition from Baghdadi himself. Consistent with the fact that many foreign fighters from North Africa/Sahel have



**Figure 1: Map of North Africa and Sahel.**

gone to Syria to fight in support of IS, it has also become customary for some of these fighters to then return to their native countries, having established fresh contacts with leading IS emirs.

### What is IS doing in Libya?

From the very start, North Africa has been part of the territory that the IS Caliphate has envisioned as being under its dominion, and Libya in particular has been one of its top priorities. IS has exploited the chaotic political situation in Libya to gain a foothold and subsequently consolidate its territorial presence there. The first step in this process was, as previously mentioned, to seize the northern coastal town of Derna, which IS was nonetheless forced to abandon in the summer of 2015. Despite the fact that the Derna province is now a thing of the past, it is nevertheless of interest to dwell on IS' occupation of the city, insofar as it provides us with an insight into how IS goes about expanding and occupying new areas. As early as 2013, Baghdadi sent representatives to the former jihadist stronghold of Derna in order to explore the possibilities for expansion into the region.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after the proclamation of the Caliphate in the summer of 2014, a youth militia group in Derna swore allegiance to Baghdadi, and in October the IS leadership sent the Iraqi Abu Nabil al-Anbari to Libya to formalize the annexation of the city to the Caliphate.<sup>3</sup> Abu Nabil was an experienced fighter, who under the banner of AQ had been fighting in Iraq since 2004. The establishment of the Derna province was thus a decision taken at the very highest level of IS. However, despite the fact that Libya was given high priority, the local IS group—which was seconded by the Iraqi branch of IS—did not succeed in winning the support of the local population of Derna. In June 2015, a clash with a local group with links to AQ led to IS being driven out of the city.

IS has also experienced various difficulties in the towns of Benghazi and Sabratha. In eastern Benghazi IS encountered military resistance from one of the two Libyan governments—the Tobruk government—in the form of an assault by General Hefar's troops, who were in the process of combatting various Islamist militias in eastern Libya. At the start of 2016, US warplanes bombed an IS refuge in the coastal town of Sabratha in western Libya which amongst others housed a large number of Tunisian foreign fighters. The target of this attack was a Tunisian citizen who had allegedly orchestrated several terrorist attacks in neighboring Tunisia.

Until December 2016 IS' primary presence in Libya is thus in the "Sirte province" – a coastal area surrounding the city of Sirte, which was formerly one of Muammar Gaddafi's strongholds. In Sirte, paradoxically enough, the local AQ-

<sup>2</sup> Geoff D. Porter, "How realistic is Libya as an Islamic State "fallback?," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 3 (March 2016): 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> Ourdan, Rémy, "Derna, premier territoire de l'EI hors des frontières du "califat" en Libye", *Le Monde* (13 November 2014).

affiliated militia, Ansar al Sharia paved the way for IS' occupation of the city. In the course of 2014, Ansar al Sharia established itself in Sirte in typical AQ style by making a *dawa* (proclamation) and doing charitable work. However, in contrast to the situation in Derna, where IS came into conflict with local militias, certain elements in Ansar al Sharia in Sirte elected to affiliate themselves with IS and declare their loyalty to Baghdadi. In the period from February to May 2015, IS succeeded in seizing control of all of the important institutions in the city: radio, television, the immigration center, university, etc. It is by no means insignificant that Sirte was the city of Gaddafi's birth. In Sirte, IS was able to exploit dissatisfaction among the local militias loyal to Gaddafi with political developments in Libya that had undermined their influence and prestige. IS' territorial presence in Sirte has presented IS with a number of advantages. The province provides IS with a strategic depth with respect to Syria and Iraq and the possibility of potentially moving into Libya, if IS were forced into combat in these countries. In addition IS derives an advantage from being present in an area which is not only close to Libyan oil fields but also to the borders of Europe.

Beyond its territorial presence in the Sirte province, IS had a more discrete presence in practically all of the cities along the Libyan coast, primarily in Tripoli and Sabratha. A group calling itself "the Tripoli province" has at regular intervals claimed responsibility for various attacks against one of the Libyan governments. This is not, however, a case of IS having achieved decisive control over a given area. Rather, IS has achieved a more sporadic presence in particular quarters or smaller areas which it utilizes as refuges or training camps. These Libyan IS enclaves have attracted a large number of foreign fighters, primarily from Libya's neighbor Tunisia, but also from other countries in North Africa and Sahel. In 2015, a UN report estimated that around 5,500 Tunisians have affiliated themselves to IS, and that around 1,000-1,500 of them are located in Libya.<sup>4</sup> It is relatively easy for Tunisians to cross the border into Libya, where they can side with IS groups and receive training. Subsequently, these foreign fighters either proceed to Syria to fight in support of IS' cause there, or they remain in Libya and contribute to consolidating the Sirte province or other IS enclaves in Libya.

In Libya, IS has attracted foreign fighters from across the entirety of North Africa and Sahel, but the Tunisian IS fighters represent a particular threat to the fragile Tunisian democracy. On several occasions, they have returned to Tunisia to carry out terrorist attacks and have more than once succeeded in damaging Tunisia's tourist industry, which is one of the country's most important sources of income. For example, these foreign fighters have carried out attacks against

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<sup>4</sup> Savannah de Tessières, Naji Abou-Khalil, Jan Barend Coetzee, Simon Dilloway, Juan Alberto Pintos Servia, and Steven Spittaels, *Letter dated 4 March 2016 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UNSC S/2016/209, March 9, 2016, accessed June 24, 2016, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/209](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/209).

a museum in the Tunisian capital and later against a beach hotel. However, the most significant of these attacks took place in early 2016 when Tunisian IS fighters operating from a base in Libya not only attempted to carry out a terrorist attack, but also tried to capture outright the Tunisian border town of Ben Gardane.<sup>5</sup> In March, as many as 100 IS fighters from the Libyan town of Sabratha, which a short time previously had been the target of US fighter jets, entered Tunisia and attacked the Tunisian military and police in Ben Gardane. They attempted to capture the town by instigating an insurrection, which ended in the death of around 50 IS fighters and 20 Tunisian soldiers.

### IS in Egypt, Nigeria and Sahel

Besides its territorial presence in Libya—and the failed attempt to expand across the Tunisian border—the Caliphate has succeeded in establishing a myriad of small enclaves and provinces in North Africa and Sahel. Despite the ubiquitous use of the term “province,” which suggests a territorial dimension, IS’ activities in these areas seldom amount to territorial gains as was the case in Sirte, but rather more or less established groups attempting to bask in reflected glory by declaring allegiance to Baghdadi, thereby sharing in the popularity enjoyed by IS until quite recently. In November 2014, on the Sinai Peninsula, the Egyptian insurgency group *Ansar Beit al-Maqdis*, which came into being in the wake of the Arab Spring, transformed itself into a “Sinai-province.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in October 2015, this same “Sinai-province” was behind the attack on a Russian passenger aircraft after Russia had begun to bomb IS in Syria. Nonetheless, the group’s primary goal is, as previously stated, to destabilize the Egyptian regime by attacking the Egyptian military and police in Sinai. The group has furthermore on several occasions managed to strike targets deep inside Cairo. The attack on the Russian airplane demonstrates, however, that the group no longer solely has a narrow national agenda, but has also begun to carry out attacks bearing the hallmark of IS, albeit to a limited extent.

However, IS has not only established a presence in North Africa. In March 2015, the Nigerian group Boko Haram also aligned itself with IS and in so doing transformed itself into Islamic State’s “province in West Africa.” This metamorphosis from violent insurgency group to IS province occurred at a point in time when Boko Haram was under significant pressure from the fact that Nigerian government forces in collaboration with troops from neighboring Chad, Cameroon, Niger and France had launched a military offensive against Boko Haram. Shortly afterwards IS’ official spokesman, Adnani, bid Boko Haram welcome into the IS family and announced that Boko Haram’s affiliation clearly showed that the Caliphate had now spread to encompass West Africa. There has long been doubt as to the extent to which there was a concrete link between Boko

<sup>5</sup> Frédéric Bobin, “La Tunisie au péril de l’État islamique,” *Le Monde* March 3, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> SITE Intelligence, “Ansar Beit al-Maqdis Pledges Allegiance to the Islamic State,” November 9, 2014.

Haram and central elements of IS. However, in August 2016, IS appointed a new leader of its West African province, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, and thereby demonstrated its increasing ambitions to exert an influence over this province. This in turn led the former leader of the province, Shekau, over the months that followed to broadcast a series of videos in which he once again made use of the group's earlier name Boko Haram.

Besides these IS provinces and enclaves, the Caliphate's expansion into North Africa and Sahel has been extremely fragmented. In the Sahel area, militant groups are traditionally dynamic and fluctuant, and there is a long tradition of alliances sporadically being formed and broken off as groups see fit. A number of IS groups have thus come into being as breakaway groups from existing AQ groups. However, such breakaway groups only exist for as long as they have a clear interest in enjoying the prestige that accompanies the IS brand. Thus, there have been instances of individuals in a given AQ group breaking away and declaring allegiance to Baghdadi, only to return once again to their former AQ group shortly thereafter. Likewise, there are examples of individuals from an AQ group declaring loyalty to Baghdadi, while nonetheless remaining members of this same AQ group. Members of the AQ group al-Mourabitoun, led by the infamous Mokhtar Belmokhtar, have sworn allegiance to Baghdadi while remaining part of Mourabitoun for example.

### **AQ in North Africa and Sahel: a historical overview**

IS' move into North Africa and Sahel has undoubtedly led to a degree of rivalry between IS and local AQ groups, albeit not necessarily—as was the case in Derna—to violent confrontation. However, disagreements between IS and AQ do not simply arise sporadically on the ground, but are codified at the highest level by leading ideologues within IS and AQ, including AQ's supreme leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The theological disagreement between IS and AQ is also playing out in North Africa and Sahel where, prior to IS' move into the area, there was a relatively strong and well-consolidated AQ group, AQIM (AQ in Islamic Maghreb). AQIM has been among AQ leader al-Zawahiri's most loyal supporters, tirelessly reiterating its support for AQ's leadership and in common with Zawahiri it has countless times renewed its oath of loyalty to a succession of leaders of the Taliban.

In 2006, AQ established a foothold in North Africa when the militant Algerian insurgency group, GSPC, initiated formalized cooperation with AQ, which simultaneously occasioned a change of name to AQIM. In 2006, GSPC found itself weakened by the Algerian military and, for this reason, it was an opportune moment to join the ranks of AQ and in so doing profit from the prestige the group then enjoyed. Prior to the establishment of this new branch of AQ in Algeria there had been exploratory talks and approaches between GSPC and AQ's branch in Iraq (AQI), which is one of the immediate predecessors of Islamic State. GSPC's leaders harbored a deep admiration for AQI's iconic leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who at that point in time led an extremely violent guerrilla

war against the US-led coalition in Iraq. GSPC sent a great number of Algerian foreign fighters to Iraq to fight alongside AQI, and in the summer of 2005 Zarqawi repaid this support by killing two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad. Following Zarqawi's death in June 2006, AQIM's leader Abdelmalek Droukdel adopted the epithet Abu Musab in honor of Zarqawi.

AQIM has nonetheless long had links to AQ, going back to the late 1980s, when many Algerians travelled to Afghanistan to take part in the guerrilla war against the Soviet Union. At the start of the 1990s, some of these Algerian "Afghans" returned to Algeria, where they contributed to founding the Islamist insurgency movement GIA, which attempted to topple the Algerian government. It was GIA which throughout the 1990s waged a bloody civil war against the Algerian regime, and in general against Muslims who did not stick to the theological "straight and narrow." These Algerian veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War not only had experience in guerrilla warfare, but also brought a very strict concept of Islam back from Afghanistan. Their extremely violent strategy backfired, however, causing the Algerian public to turn its back on GIA. At the same time, within GIA there was dissatisfaction with the group's violent approach, and in 1998 a section of the leading emirs within GIA broke away to establish the militant GSPC, which henceforth was to focus on the conflict with the Algerian state.

In the early 2000s, the Algerian military put great pressure on GSPC, and this prompted the group to expand southwards towards the Sahara – primarily into northern Mali, but also into Niger and Mauritania. Here, the group ran a lucrative smuggling business, and being experienced guerrilla fighters, they were able to integrate rapidly into the local economy and local society. The newly arrived GSPC fighters married local women and were generous with the income from their profitable smuggling enterprise. Around 2003, GSPC expanded its sphere of activity when it began to take foreign hostages, who were released in return for astronomical ransoms. GSPC's expansion into the Sahara and the Sahel region lent the group a strategic depth relative to its principal activity, namely the guerrilla war against the Algerian state. In 2006, these same Algerian guerrilla fighters joined the ranks of AQ and, in alliance with a range of local groups, in the summer of 2012 conquered the whole of northern Mali, where they then established an Islamic emirate. At the start of 2013, the French military intervened in the situation in Mali, forcing AQIM and related groups to flee. Some high-ranking emirs were killed, but with their experience as guerrilla fighters, many of the militants succeeded in carrying out a tactical withdrawal to southern Libya. It was from southern Libya that, a few days after the commencement of the French intervention in Mali, the experienced guerrilla fighter, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, instigated an extensive hostage-taking operation which succeeded in taking several hundred hostages at a gas plant at In Amenas in southern Algeria. This attack transformed Belmokhtar from an unknown AQIM leader to the most wanted criminal in Sahel.



## **From fragmentation to alliance**

The question is, however, what IS' move into North Africa and Sahel has meant for the battle-hardened AQ group AQIM and the other AQ-affiliated groups in the region. As already stated, Libya is where IS has been most strongly placed outside of its primary Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. However, North Africa/Sahel is also a region where AQ is relatively well established. After AQ was weakened in Pakistan and Yemen by US drone strikes, AQIM is one of the few remaining AQ groups which is both able to hold on its own against IS and at the same time has the capacity to carry out venomous attacks against Western citizens and interests in the region. One might also ask whether AQ's center of operations has moved from the east into the west, such that, in an operational sense, AQIM has seized the initiative from AQ. Zawahiri is still AQ's undisputed leader, and it is Zawahiri who, in collaboration with other AQ ideologues, has plotted the group's ideological path. Yet in an operational sense, AQIM presumably has a greater capacity than the original iteration of AQ in Pakistan and Afghanistan. At all events in the course of 2015/2016, AQIM has escalated its level of activity and has carried out a greater number of attacks against Western targets in the Sahel region than has previously been the case.

Focusing on the relationship between IS and AQ in North Africa/Sahel, it could be said that IS has primarily established a foothold in areas where AQIM has not had any long-term, deeply-rooted presence. AQIM has thus managed to stand its ground in the face of IS and to a certain extent has succeeded in curbing the Caliphate's move into North Africa. At present, IS is weakened in northern Libya but is still present, to a lesser extent, in Sinai and Nigeria. The notable fact about these areas is that they do not overlap with AQIM's primary areas of operations in Algeria and Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and southern Libya).

IS has attempted to establish itself in those North African countries which in 2011 experienced political upheaval – yet the same may be said of AQ. Thus, in the wake of the Arab Spring, a number of new AQ-affiliated groups sprang up in these countries: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya, Ansar beit al-Maqdis in Egypt, and Uqba bin Nafi in the western part of Tunisia on the border with Algeria. With the exception of Uqba bin Nafi, which was established by AQIM and should therefore be considered as a branch of AQIM, many of these new AQ groups subsequently joined forces with IS. This has not always taken place on entirely peaceful terms, however. The principal rivalry has played out in Libya, where both groups have an interest in exploiting the chaotic political situation. IS has combated the AQ groups in Libya by systematically executing some of their leaders. This method has borne fruit in some areas. As already mentioned, in Sirte the local Ansar al-Sharia group decided to affiliate itself with IS after IS had executed the group's local leader. Nonetheless, an Ansar al-Sharia group still exists in Benghazi, which regularly carries out attacks against one of the Libyan governments, which has its headquarters in Tobruk.

However, the primary consequence of IS' move into the African continent is that AQIM and the myriad of loosely related AQ-groups have formed an alliance in order to present a united front against the upstart IS. Prior to IS' advance into the region, the AQ groups in North Africa/Sahel were characterized by endless discord and rivalries, which led to constant schisms and fragmentation. Personal antagonisms and disagreement concerning power and resources regularly led to small factions opting to leave AQIM to establish their own militant group (*katiba*). Some of the groups, which in 2012 established an emirate in northern Mali, were among these breakaway groups from AQIM, which nevertheless did not prevent them from cooperating with one another in relative peace and tolerance. By the end of 2012 the experienced AQIM emir, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, had broken away from AQIM—though not from the core of AQ—and established his own group.

In the face of this behavior on the part of IS, the AQ splinter groups have joined forces. These are AQ groups within the region and AQIM's relationship with AQ groups outside of North Africa/Sahel. Following the establishment of the Caliphate, AQIM and AQAP (AQ on the Arabian Peninsula) decided in the autumn of 2014 to broadcast a joint statement in which they taunted Islamic State for killing other Muslims, and encourage Muslims in Syria and Iraq to present a united front against IS.<sup>7</sup> AQIM and AQAP have on several occasions since then broadcast joint statements in which they have rebuked IS. In September 2015, Zawahiri did not mince his words when he castigated Baghdadi and his pseudo-caliphate, which he said could in no way live up to prevailing Sharia law.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after the publication of Zawahiri's broadside against IS, AQAP and AQIM broadcast a joint statement in which they reiterated Zawahiri's critique to the letter: the Caliphate did not live up to prevailing Sharia law, and IS was committing an offence against true Islam by bringing about discord between Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Since then, this has been AQIM's chief grudge against IS: that they are sowing dissension between Muslims and have no qualms about killing fellow Muslims. On two occasions, the duo of AQIM and AQAP was expanded to a trio, when the two groups broadcast statements together with the Nusra Front. This took place following the public announcement of the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar's death in 2015, and after the murder of his successor, Mullah Akhtar. Thus, on these two occasions a conglomerate of three large AQ-groups united to put out a joint statement.

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<sup>7</sup> SITE Intelligence, "AQAP and AQIM Release Joint Statement Condemning U.S.-led Alliance in Iraq and Syria, Urge Warring Factions to Unite," September 16, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> SITE Intelligence, "Zawahiri Attacks Baghdadi, IS for Exporting Infighting from Iraq and Syria," September 9, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> SITE Intelligence, "AQAP and AQIM Give Scathing Rebuke of IS in Joint Statement," November 1, 2015.



## **AQ in North Africa and Sahel: the old jihadists strike back**

This demonstrative fraternization between AQ groups to a large extent also pertains within the region, whereby various AQ groups which had earlier elected to go their separate ways proclaimed in the course of 2015 that they had now rejoined forces, and what is more were working in partnership on carrying out substantial terrorist attacks. The question is, however, whether it is IS' move into the region which has influenced AQ's strategy of fraternization and its escalating level of activity in terms of attacks targeted at foreign interests. Is it competition from IS which has caused these AQ groups to change strategy and carry out more and increasingly varied forms of terrorist attack than previously?

There is no doubt that IS has for a long time led the pack when it comes to recruiting new followers. For a long period, the foreign fighters who travelled to Syria preferred to align themselves with IS, which up until 2016 had seen success on the battlefield and at the same time—with the attacks in Paris and Brussels—demonstrated that they are capable of striking targets in the very heart of European capitals. The IS Caliphate thus showed itself able not only to offer its followers the opportunity to take part in fighting, but also to participate in a brand-new Islamist society as well as extremely violent propaganda videos. Compared with this, AQ took on the appearance of a group of pensioners who once, many years ago, had been trendsetters, back when now deceased icons such as Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Anwar al-Awlaki were still alive.

When AQ's current emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, broadcasts crackling sound files, months or even years often go by before they reach the ears of the general public. These sound files are often accompanied by still images of Zawahiri – an old man with a long white beard and glasses. In contrast to IS' sensuous orgies of violence involving young well-trained fighters, AQ's videos present elderly gentlemen delivering long theological monologues in which they take IS to task by referring to both the Quran, Sharia law and Islamist learning. For a long period, the pages of Western media outlets bulged with stories about IS, while news items about AQ were few and far between.

AQ is thus able to provide theology, but struggles to provide action in the form of successful acts of terrorism. This is presumably one of the reasons why both AQIM and practically all AQ groups were falling over one another to praise the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015, which was carried out on behalf of the AQ branch AQAP. AQ had at long last succeeded in carrying out that which they had long dreamed of but had not been capable of achieving – a spectacular terrorist attack on European soil.

However, in the case of North Africa/Sahel, the local AQ groups have demonstrated that they are still capable of carrying out attacks against Western targets. AQIM's supreme leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, and the former AQIM emir, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, are arguably middle-aged men—which is to say they are well into their 40s—but this also means that they are experienced

fighters who have been *mujahideen* for 25 years and have achieved the near impossible – survival. This extensive experience means that they understand the ins and outs of insurgency. If AQ are to survive in North Africa/Sahel, it is not enough to simply go to ground and wait for the IS phenomenon to blow over. AQ has had to demonstrate that it still possesses the capacity to plan and carry out terrorist attacks and that in this particular geographical area it has a greater capacity than IS. It is in any case clear that the AQ groups' ability to carry out terrorist attacks has escalated since IS entered the scene as a jihadi force in the region. At the same time, AQIM has made a virtue of carrying out terrorist attacks which differ demonstratively from IS terrorist attacks.

The principal distinction between the two groups lies in who they consider to be legitimate targets. AQ-affiliated groups accuse IS of “shedding the blood of Muslims”—for instance when IS launches attacks on the Nusra Front in Syria—in contrast to their own policy of demonstratively directing their aggression against non-Muslims who are unlawfully present on Muslim soil. In North Africa/Sahel it is primarily Westerners who are attacked and kidnapped, but attacks are also targeted against soldiers stationed in the region. These are either French or Algerian soldiers engaged in anti-terrorism activities in Sahel, or soldiers from the UN peacekeeping mission to Mali, MINUSMA.

AQIM and groups affiliated to it do not necessarily have the capacity or the desire to do as IS has done and carry out terrorist attacks on European soil. Yet following the attack on Paris in November 2015, for which IS claimed responsibility, AQIM has made a point of demonstrating that it is capable of carrying out large-scale attacks against foreign nationals and Western interests in Sahel. Since November 2015, AQIM has steadily expanded its sphere of activity, making its attacks unpredictable. Thus, a coalition of groups related to and sympathetic with AQ has succeeded in carrying out three major attacks on hotels in the capitals of Mali, Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast, far beyond its traditional area of operations. In carrying out these attacks, the AQ groups in question have made a point of demonstrating that their *modus operandi* differs from that of IS, inasmuch as they exclusively target foreign nationals. In the course of these attacks, they asked potential victims to state which religious faith they adhered to in order to ensure that they did not unintentionally end up killing Muslims.

### **IS on the retreat – AQ in rude health?**

As already stated, North Africa—and primarily Libya—has been the Caliphate's top priority as regards territorial expansion. In May 2016, the late IS spokesman, Adnani, broadcast a tirade against the USA in which he spoke of Sirte as being on a par with Mosul and Raqqa: “Even if you took Mosul, Sirte and Raqqa, and all of our cities, you would still not have defeated us.” This statement indicates not only Sirte's prominent place in official IS propaganda, but also that IS' military fortunes have turned, and that the Caliphate has already

conceded that a territorial setback is a possibility. Simultaneously the word “expansion” vanished from official IS propaganda.

There can be no doubt that IS now finds itself under increasing pressure – in Mosul and Raqqa, and in December 2016 Misrata militias with support from the USA, France and the UK supposedly expelled the group from Sirte.<sup>10</sup> Already in August, US warplanes bombed targets in Sirte, and both the USA and France currently have special forces’ troops on the ground in Libya. In the spring of 2016, the UN succeeded in cobbling together a fragile national coalition government in Tripoli under the leadership of Fayez al-Sarraj, and the new government announced that the fight against IS was among its top priorities. The question remains where the IS fighters, who were expelled from Sirte, will go. There are already unconfirmed reports that some of these fighters have begun to retreat down towards Sahel. There may be potential repercussions for the UN MINUSMA mission in Mali, or for Sahel countries such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, where France is currently carrying out a major anti-terror effort – “operation Barkhane.” In neighboring Tunisia, there is also deep concern about what might happen when the large numbers of Tunisian foreign fighters aligned with IS return to Tunisia.

All indications thus point to IS’ territorial move into North Africa as being far more fragile than AQ’s more consolidated presence in North Africa and the wider Sahel region. AQIM has operated in this desert region for decades. They know the area back to front, are integrated into the local economy and have managed to survive French and Algerian counter-terrorism efforts since the 1990s. Even though AQIM has traditionally been engaged in insurgency against the Algerian government, its transformation to a branch of AQ has meant that “the distant foe,” i.e. the West, has now become a target on a par with the Algerian government. Uppermost on the list of enemies is the old colonial power, France. However, there is nothing to suggest that the North African AQ groups have any intention of carrying out terrorist attacks on European soil. It is not simply a question of capacity, but presumably also depends upon a consideration of what the consequences will be if they are directly linked to a terrorist attack in Europe. On the other hand, they have not refrained from attacking Western interests on their home patch, namely North Africa and Sahel. In this respect, they are no different from IS, which still has ambitions of carrying out attacks in the West.

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<sup>10</sup> Frédéric Bobin, “Libye : l’Etat islamique vaincu à Syrte, après six mois de combats,” *Le Monde*, December 5, 2016.

### About the author

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Research Article

## Jihad in Russian

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**Abstract:** While Russia's military involvement in the war in Syria has received great attention, less focus has been directed at the foreign fighters from Russia and other post-Soviet states who have joined the Islamic State and other Jihadist groups. The emergence of these Jihadists has been a gradual process, which began in the 1990s, and it has now led to a situation where an estimated 7,000 Russians and 3,000 Central Asians are fighting in Syria. These figures present a challenge for the various states fighting the Jihadist groups, but they pose a much greater problem for the Russian and other national authorities, who will have to handle the fighters, when they return home.

**Keywords:** Russia, Caucasus, Central Asia, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Uighurs.

### Introduction

On 28 June 2016, the main international airport of Istanbul was hit by a terrorist attack when three men carried out a suicide mission in which, after an initial assault with automatic weapons, they detonated their suicide vests. The Turkish authorities soon identified the three men as citizens of Russia (the Republic of Dagestan), Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, respectively, and they alleged that the attackers had wanted to demonstrate their support for Islamic State (IS).<sup>1</sup> The terrorist attack in Istanbul is symbolic of a worrying development by which Islamist environments in the former Soviet Union seem to be producing still more supporters of IS and al-Qaeda (AQ), for example, who are willing to use terror as a means of furthering their cause.

<sup>1</sup> "Istanbul airport bombers were Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz: Turkish official," *Reuters*, June 30, 2016.

## The historical background

Pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union were both empires. Through a long series of military victories, Tsarist Russia in particular succeeded in subjugating a large number of minorities in the neighboring regions, thereby gradually expanding the empire. The specific feature of this expansion was the fact that colonies were directly attached to the empire and there was therefore a relatively free exchange of people between the center and the periphery.

Islam became part of the Russian empire by the conquest of Kazan (1552) and Astrakhan (1556). In the following 350 years, the country continued along a path of expansion which would eventually give it control over the current states of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan as well as the Northern Caucasus, today the home of Russian republics such as Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia. The common feature of these areas is the fact that they have a Sunni Muslim majority population and that Islam has played—and continues to play—a larger role in the public life here than in the other parts of the former empire.

Pre-revolutionary Russia largely left its Muslim population groups to themselves and the authorities had modest ambitions only to reform these minority cultures. This changed under Soviet rule, which attempted to create a new and better (wo)man (the “Homo Sovieticus”) through a policy of aggressive atheism and “Sovietification” (in reality “Russofication”). This (wo)man was to be enlightened and therefore needed to lose religion in a total break with the pre-revolutionary ways of life.

This policy had a certain effect and religious practices therefore largely disappeared from public life as the knowledge of religious affairs in society in general also declined. This was also the case in the predominantly Muslim areas. Here, a combination of unchallenged atheist information campaigns (for instance in teaching and in popular culture) and oppression (for instance the demolition of mosques, the closure of *madradas* and the firing of staff members who had engaged in unwanted religious activities) brought general knowledge of Islam to a very low level. In certain areas, some knowledge was maintained through illegal underground activities, however, and in the Northern Caucasus in particular, the extensive secret *Sufi* networks helped preserve old knowledge and traditions.<sup>2</sup>

The second half of the 1980’s witnessed a political thaw in the Soviet Union, and this development also left more room for religion. Soviet citizens eagerly turned to religion, which became an identity marker for many, and perhaps no more so than for the non-Orthodox minority groups in the country. This was also a noticeable trend in the Muslim areas in the new Russia as well as in the Muslim-dominated new states. Being knowledgeable of Islam and to be a practicing Muslim became a sign of status, if only to show that one was “non-Rus-

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Alexandre Bennigsen and Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide* (London: C. Hurst, 1986).

sian” in one’s cultural outlook. However, after decades of atheism, it was not always straightforward to define what “we” believe in and what “our” traditions are, and the outside world also started to influence the Muslims of the former Soviet Union in ways that they had not experienced under the closed-off Soviet regime. All kinds of interpretations were brought to the religious market place in the hope that they would appeal to a bewildered population in search of new identities.

### **The situation in Russia: AQ versus Islamic State**

As many as 20 million people in Russia are Muslims. This figure covers Russian citizens (approximately 16 million) as well as migrant workers (approximately four million) from Central Asia in particular. They are concentrated in the Volga-Ural area, in the Northern Caucasus and of course in the larger Russian cities.<sup>3</sup> According to general estimates, some four million Muslims live in Moscow and an additional 700,000 reside in St. Petersburg.

Even though Islam has been part of Russian society for more than 450 years, there seems to have been a paradigm shift in the public attitude towards Islam in the past 20-30 years. Earlier, Islam was largely an exotic phenomenon, which ordinary citizens could experience in literature, in movies, and on trips to the Northern Caucasus, for instance. However, in many parts of the country, the religion is now part of everyday life. Mosques, both big and small, are being built, and Muslims now live alongside their co-nationals in apartment blocks, hold positions at the work place, attend the regional university and go to local schools and kindergartens.

The increased public attention to Islam is also due to a general process of Islamization, broadly defined here as the formulation of one or more religiously founded alternatives to the existing political structures and normative frameworks, *and* it is due to the fact that the country has been severely hit by “Islamic” terrorism. This rather loose category covers the entire spectrum, from terrorism carried out by non-religious separatists from Muslim-dominated areas, to terrorism carried out by radical Islamists seeking a complete overturn of contemporary society, be it locally, or in Russia as a whole, or on an even bigger scale. The defining feature is the fact that, by public understanding, these acts all originate in the same place; the country’s Muslim minority group.

Some of the more spectacular and deadly terrorist attacks from this category include the Budyonovsk hospital (1995, 121 killed), the *Nordost* theatre in Moscow (2002, 170 killed), a local Beslan school (2004, 344 killed) and the Moscow metro (2004 and 2010, 40 and 20 killed, respectively). The common feature of these attacks is the link to the Northern Caucasus, where the legacy of the two Chechen wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2009, respectively) is still being felt. This is testimony to the severity of the two wars and to the desperation felt by part of the population of Chechnya in particular and of the Northern

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<sup>3</sup> Aleksey Malashenko, *Islam dlya Rossii* (Moscow: Carnegie Center, 2007), pp. 10-14.

Caucasus in general. Political repression, public stigmatization and the challenging social conditions together represent a recipe for radicalization.

Militant Islamist ideology became dominant in Chechnya and its neighboring republics in the late 1990s, when the use of terrorism became widely accepted as part of the struggle against Russia. A characteristic of this first phase of Islamist terrorism in Russia was that it had an internal focus. Initially, it was linked to the first war in Chechnya and some of the more uncompromising groups wanted the secession of Chechnya or even wider stretches of the Northern Caucasus from Russia, for instance, with the subsequent establishment of an Islamic Emirate covering the newly seceded areas. Secular law had to be rejected, as was also attempted in the 1990s in small autonomous pockets in the Northern Caucasus, and Islamic law had to take its place.

For many, this represented the ultimate dream of a return to the more traditional societies which existed before Soviet secularism became part of the official ideology and, so it was argued, robbed the Muslims of the Northern Caucasus of their true identity. This dream could only be realized through secession from Russia, so the argument continued, but since Russia did not intend to surrender these areas, an armed struggle was needed. Shamil Basayev (killed in 2006), Zelimkhan Yanderbiyev (killed in 2004), Aslan Mashkadov (killed in 2005) and Doku Umarov (killed in 2014) are some of the names from this time.

In 2007, Umarov established "the Caucasian Emirate," previously perhaps the most active terrorist group in Russia, which initially operated under a self-declared affiliation to AQ and which also served as an umbrella organization for other smaller groups. For Umarov, the central issue was no longer the independence of Chechnya but the establishment of an Islamic emirate covering the entire Northern Caucasus. This aim gradually led him to introduce the struggle to other parts of Russia, ordering terrorist attacks against civilians throughout the country.

However, in 2014, several high-ranking members of the Emirate decided to make public their support for IS, which responded by establishing the so-called IS Caucasus Province in the following year. The transfer of loyalty by these fighters from AQ to IS seems to have been mainly ideologically motivated and it seems to rest on a greater acceptance of the self-declared role and mission of the latter organization. This development has led to a weakening of the Emirate, which is now struggling to prevent a continued departure of members from its ranks. These problems have been exacerbated by the relentless pressure from the Russian security services, which in April 2015 killed Umarov's successor, Aliaskhab Kebekov, and immediately afterwards, in August 2015, Kebekov's successor, Magomed Suleimanov.

The militant Islamists came from Chechnya as well as from the neighboring republics, and there was even an influx of foreign Jihadists, for instance from the Middle East, who wanted to support the Chechens and other Northern Caucasus peoples in their fight against the secular Russian central power. Many of these foreign terrorists arrived with extensive battle experience from the



Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, from the Tajik civil war and from various conflicts in the Middle East, and they contributed to making the situation in Russia more extreme. They would typically bring with them a very black-and-white view of religion in general and Islam in particular, an uncompromising attitude towards “the enemy,” as well as much-needed finances.

One of the more well-known figures was Ibn al-Khattab (killed in 2002), a Saudi-born Jihadist with ties to the founder of AQ, Osama bin-Laden. Al-Khattab had fought together with bin-Laden against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Accompanied by some of his most loyal fighters, he arrived in Chechnya in the mid-1990’s and then helped establish a group of foreign Jihadists in Chechnya. To many, al-Khattab became synonymous with the internationalization of the conflict in the Northern Caucasus and his profile fitted the role perfectly. He won an important ally by joining forces with the unit of Basayev, who masterminded the 1995 attack on the Budyonnovsk hospital. Al-Khattab’s knowledge and practical experience with asymmetric warfare secured him a prominent position in the Islamist terrorist environment in the Northern Caucasus, and he served to give the conflict an even more irreconcilable and violent dimension.

This phase, however, still did not see apocalyptic terrorism but rather a sort of carefully measured shock effect in an asymmetric conflict with the central power. More was gradually added to the shock effect, however, in terms of both targets (including more attacks against civilians in the main Russian population centers) and means (especially through the use since 2000 of suicide bombers and by the recruitment of more women, in particular the infamous “black widows”).

The difficult situation in the Northern Caucasus generally and in Chechnya specifically also translated into large-scale terrorism, because conditions at the time made this possible. The Russian authorities simply found it difficult to enforce their rule in the region, and larger self-controlled areas emerged in which central rule was ignored. This offered the North Caucasian rebels an opportunity to gather, to train and to use the areas as launch pads for their activities in the Northern Caucasus or elsewhere in Russia. This was illustrated in 1995, when Basayev led as many as 200 terrorists in a convoy into Stavropol Krai and on to the hospital in Budyonnovsk. The terrorists moved almost unnoticed and whenever they were stopped at control posts, they simply bribed corrupt security forces to be allowed to drive on.

When Russian President Vladimir Putin was called onto the political stage in August 1999, he made “the power of the vertical” his first political slogan. The ambition was to re-establish the authority of the central power *throughout* Russia, but his main priority was clearly to bring the disputed areas of the Northern Caucasus back under the control of Moscow. An uncompromising policy led to a rollback of the self-delegated autonomy found in many regions, and the authorities were given additional measures to enforce central power locally, regionally and nationally. In 2000, Putin appointed local strongman

Akhmad Kadyrov as the new head of the regional administration in Chechnya, and this appointment sent a strong message from Putin about his ambition to drive out the terrorists from the republic.

However, in 2004 terrorists succeeded in killing Akhmad Kadyrov in a spectacular attack carried out at the central stadium in Grozny. Putin's search for a successor to Kadyrov led him to Ramzan Kadyrov, Akhmad Kadyrov's son, and in 2007 Ramzan took over as the new Chechen president. Alu Alkhanov, then Chechen president, filled the interim until Ramzan turned 30, the minimum age required for any presidential candidate. Under Ramzan Kadyrov an iron rule, even stricter than that of his father, has been introduced in Chechnya and Islamists, violent as well as non-violent, have left the republic in great numbers to seek refuge in neighboring areas (especially in Dagestan) or even abroad.

This development is important to note, as it provides the background to the current phase in which Islamist terrorists are leaving Russia in ever greater numbers to join groups, mainly IS, elsewhere. It should be added, however, that even though the Russian authorities have succeeded in strengthening central rule, Russia is being hit by terrorist attacks on an almost weekly basis. From a Russian perspective, most attacks are relatively small, with only a few casualties, and usually too insignificant to make news in the West. Most attacks are still carried out in the Northern Caucasus, and Dagestan in particular has suffered, as much of the Chechen conflict now finds its expression there instead.

### **Syria: The new battle zone for Jihadists**

It was only in 2012 that the international media started reporting about the presence of Caucasian Jihadists in Syria. One of the first to arrive was Rustam Gelayev, the son of one of the most powerful Chechen warlords, Ruslan Gelayev (killed in 2004). News of the killing of Rustam Gelayev during a battle for Aleppo in 2012 became a major story as it indicated for the first time the magnitude of the presence of the Caucasian Jihadists in Syria.

The Syria conflict has offered Russian Islamists a sanctuary and a new cause. According to the Russian security service, FSB, as many as 2,400 Russians have fought—or are fighting—for IS or other militant Islamist groups, but Russian experts put the figure at a full 7,000.<sup>4</sup> The Caucasian Jihadists are fragmented and they not only fight for IS, but also for other groups with different ideologies and aims. Initially, the Caucasian Jihadists would form their own smaller units and would often be under the command of a more battle-hardened Jihadist with experience from the wars in Chechnya. Later, many of these smaller units were forced to choose side and to join larger groups. Overall, the Caucasian Jihadists in Syria form three distinct groups.

The first and most well-known group is composed of Jihadists who joined IS under the command of the charismatic red-bearded emir Umar al-Shishani. Al-Shishani, an ethnic Chechen with Georgian citizenship, was one of the first to

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<sup>4</sup> Anonymous Russian expert interviewed in Brussels, October 22, 2015.

arrive in the area. He established a smaller group of predominantly Caucasian Jihadists under the name *Katibat al-Muhajireen*. He soon became a household figure as he led his fighters to several successful attacks against Syrian government forces. His popularity led to an influx of people to his group, which expanded in terms of both membership and geography. He was later appointed so-called Minister of War for IS and thus became the highest-ranking Caucasian in the IS hierarchy. Al-Shishani was reported dead prematurely by both local and international media several times, but he seems to have been killed in July 2016 when IS announced news of his death. Despite the death of al-Shishani, the Caucasian Jihadists continue to play an important role for IS.

Whereas al-Shishani decided to join IS, other leading Caucasian Jihadists instead joined the then *Nusra Front* (since July 2016 known as *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*). For example, a loyal AQ supporter, Umarov, specifically advised Caucasian Jihadists *not* to declare allegiance to IS once they arrived in Syria. One of the fighters who would seem to have taken this advice was Amir Saifullah, a well-known Chechen Jihadist with battle experience from Afghanistan and Chechnya, who decided to establish a new group in Syria under the name *Mujahidin al-Kawkaz fi as-Sham*. Saifullah was killed in 2014, but his group continues to fight, together with other smaller Caucasian and Central Asian groups, alongside *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* against both the Syrian government forces and IS.

There are still, however, Caucasian Jihadists in Syria who have decided to join neither IS nor *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* and who have instead forged alliances across local groups. One of the reasons for this is the fact that many Caucasian Jihadists prefer not to choose sides in the conflict between IS and *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* and thereby to risk killing fellow Caucasian Jihadists. The most important “independent” Caucasian group is the unit of Abu Muslim al-Shishani, which is primarily composed of Caucasian, Central Asian and Turkish Jihadists, and which operates in Northern Syria.

The war in Syria has brought forward a new generation of Caucasian Jihadists with extensive training and battle experience. It does seem, however, that they are highly fragmented. The presence of (the now killed) al-Shishani was an important factor for many Caucasian Jihadists in particular as they decided to join IS. At home in the Northern Caucasus, the situation also seems favorable for IS, as several high-ranking members of the Emirate, as mentioned earlier, decided to declare their loyalty to IS. The current leader of these “break-away” Jihadists is Rustam Asildarov, who is suspected of having masterminded a number of terrorist attacks in Russia. Islamic State in the Caucasus is now believed to be behind most of the terrorist attacks carried out in the Northern Caucasus.

## Jihadism in Central Asia

As far as Post-Soviet Central Asia is concerned, the FSB estimates that as many as 4,000 Jihadists from this region have joined IS.<sup>5</sup> The figures are surrounded by a great deal of uncertainty, however. Most seem to have been recruited from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, that is, from the two states of the region which have been hit most severely by terrorist attacks and which both suffer from a combination of heavy political repression and extensive poverty.

In Uzbekistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in particular has been successful in carrying out a series of spectacular attacks, some even with the use of suicide bombers. In recent years, however, the IMU has been on the defensive, as the Uzbek authorities have managed to push a large number of militant Islamists across the border into Kyrgyzstan. The active re-mining by the Uzbek authorities of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border should be considered in this context.

The IMU previously swore allegiance to AQ and the Taliban, but in 2015 the IMU leader, Usman Ghazi, announced that the organization should instead be considered as a regional branch of IS. As it turned out, however, a majority part of the IMU did not support this transfer of loyalty and fighting broke out between Taliban supporters and fighters loyal to Ghazi. Following the fighting, which threatened to destroy the IMU, a number of IMU fighters officially broke with IS and made explicit their allegiance to the Taliban and AQ (see also the article by Sheikh in this issue).<sup>6</sup> This has clearly left the IMU much weakened.

Tajikistan suffered from a bloody civil war from 1992-1997. Islamist forces, from the moderate to the militant, joined various secular parties in a broad opposition to the then existing order. They lost the war, however, and the outcome was only a slight shift in the distribution of power among the more privileged regions of the country. As part of the 1997 peace settlement, Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon attempted to accommodate some of the more moderate Islamist forces by incorporating them into a power-sharing scheme. This agreement has become increasingly fragile, however, as the Islamist groups seek to increase their power beyond what was offered to them two decades ago. This was illustrated in September 2015, when then Deputy Defense Minister General Narzazoda Mirzo, whose position in the cabinet was reserved for the moderate Islamist opposition, led a series of terrorist attacks in the capital Dushanbe. Mirzo was later killed by security forces during an attempted escape.

Earlier in 2015, the then head of the Tajik antiterrorist forces, Colonel Gulmorod Halimov, left Tajikistan to fight for the IS in Syria. Halimov, an experienced special operations officer, has received extensive military training in the

<sup>5</sup> "Islamic State threat to Russia is real – FSB," *RT*, April 10, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Mona Kanwal Sheikh, "Islamic State enters Al-Qaeda's old hotbed: Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 37-49, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.16.1.03>.

USA and his defection represents not only a propaganda victory for IS, but it is also an important strengthening of the military capacity of the organization. Conditions in Tajikistan make it difficult to assess the extent of the underground support for IS. The Halimov case, however, suggests that there is quite some support beneath the official surface. To this should be added that in general the Persian-speaking Tajiks also seem to have a relatively large affinity for the Taliban and, although less so, for AQ.

This brief discussion of Post-Soviet Central Asia should also include the Muslim and Turkish-speaking Uighurs. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Uighurs left their home in Xinjiang in Western China to seek refuge in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in particular. These states, which have Muslim and Turkish-speaking majority populations, border on Xinjiang and have relatively liberal political regimes. It is estimated that some 500,000 Uighurs live in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Chinese authorities have put heavy pressure on the countries in the region to ensure that China does not become a safe haven for supporters of the Turkestan Islamic Party.<sup>7</sup> This party is seeking to establish an independent and Islamic Xinjiang in a possible association with the Turkish-speaking neighbors in Post-Soviet Central Asia. An unknown number of Uighurs are currently fighting in Syria and in Iraq, some for IS and some for the *Jabhat Fath al-Sham*.

## Conclusion

Nearly seven decades of state-imposed atheism caused a tremendous interest in religion in what is now the former Soviet Union. This of course is also true for the Muslim peoples of this area. The elite, however, has generally insisted upon a separation of the state from the religious sphere, with the consequence that all these states, including even relatively conservative Tajikistan, are now defined as secular. There seems to be increasing support for Islamist ideas and thus for Islam as a viable alternative to the existing order(s). Moreover, within this group of Islamists, there seems to be a small—yet growing—number of people ready to use terrorism in order to achieve their aims.

In most parts of the former Soviet Union, the authorities conduct anti-radicalization with a considerable element of oppression and force. One of the more spectacular anti-radicalization strategies has been the decision by the Tajik authorities to forcibly shave the beards of young men whose facial hair is considered a bit too “Islamist.” Thus, one of the regions of Tajikistan in 2015 alone reported to have detained and shaved an overwhelming 13,000 men, an achievement well documented through a series of “before-and-after” photographs.<sup>8</sup> In some places, however, Islamists simply “disappear” and the security

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<sup>7</sup> Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, “The Shanghai Co-Operation Organisation,” *Asian Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2008): 217-232.

<sup>8</sup> “Tajikistan Police Shave Nearly 13,000 Men in Their Battle Against Conservative Islam,” *Time*, January 20, 2016.

services of several of these states are suspected of carrying out extra-judicial executions.

For a small part of the Muslims of the former Soviet Union, IS has been an abstract ideal, which could inspire those seeking a new post-Soviet identity with a strong role for Islam. For a number of thousands, this ideal has been concrete enough for them to leave their homes to travel to fight for IS. This development is a very real and fully legitimate cause of concern for the national authorities of these states, and they must fear the possible return of these Jihadists. The continued oppression by the authorities of the Islamists in general may contribute to making this an even more violent encounter.

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## Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Foreign Fighters

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**Abstract:** This article reviews important differences in how Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham perceive the role of the foreign fighter and outlines local dilemmas integrating foreign fighters entails for the three movements. It shows how, in addition to boosting fighting capacity, a high number of foreigners might also represent a crucial weakness.

**Keywords:** Foreign fighters, Syria, Iraq, Al Qaeda, Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra, Jabhat Fath al Sham, Ahrar al Sham.

### Introduction

Never before have so many foreign fighters been involved in a conflict as are currently involved in the Syrian civil war. By far the majority are fighting as part of Islamic State (IS), the al-Qaeda (AQ)-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and the Syrian rebel movement, Ahrar al-Sham. The United Nations (UN) has assessed that there are 15,000-20,000 foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, but the real figure could be twice as high.<sup>1</sup> Many are veterans of earlier conflicts such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, but others are new recruits who have been inspired by the momentum there was to replace Middle Eastern despots with Islamic rule in the wake of the Arab Spring. By far the majority of the foreign fighters come

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<sup>1</sup> However, the UN monitoring team has pointed out that all published figures are by necessity estimates, as it is impossible to access reliable and accurate data due to both practical and conceptual challenges. For example, it can be hard to know whether these figures also include people who have joined Shia militia or the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and whether they also include the so-called 'support functions' such as the women who move to IS territories. Moreover, it is unclear whether estimates account for the numbers of foreign fighters who have been killed, returned to their home countries, or who have gone twice.

from North Africa and neighboring countries in the Middle East, but it is thought that globally the conflict has attracted foreign fighters from up to 120 different countries (more than half of all the countries in the world), including up to 3,000-5,000 Europeans. Therefore, foreign fighters make up a considerable percentage of the fighting power of the movements, and recruitment has become yet another element in competition between IS and AQ for dominance over international Jihad. The foreign fighters are considered to have real influence on the battlefield – to such an extent that, in connection with mobilizing an international coalition to combat IS, in 2014 US Secretary of State John Kerry said that it was more important to stop the flow of foreign fighters into the organizations than to carry out air attacks on their bases. As a result, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution requiring member states to prevent their nationals from journeying out to become foreign fighters.

### **The foreign fighter flow**

One of the reasons it has been possible to induct so many foreign fighters into IS, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham is the effective infrastructure the three movements have in Syria and their good networks in Iraq. Jabhat al-Nusra has attracted veterans from the resistance to the US invasion of Iraq led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi from AQ, while IS can attract veterans from the same resistance forces who are loyal to Zarqawi's successors and the IS Caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. The roots of Ahrar al-Sham's network in Iraq go far back in time to when one of the leading figures in the movement, during another conflict, Hashim al-Sheikh was responsible for the logistics that were to lead foreign fighters through Syria and on into Iraq.

Furthermore, in another neighboring country, Turkey, the three movements' networks also play a role in securing a constant influx of foreign fighters. The border has been relatively easy to cross for most of the conflict, and therefore a large number of Turkish foreign fighters have returned to Turkey. In November 2015, about 500 Turkish nationals were imprisoned for having joined IS, and 100 for having joined Jabhat al-Nusra. Those who have returned without being arrested have good possibilities of carrying out logistical 'fixer' tasks such as establishing contact points for new foreign fighters and facilitating the route through Turkey and into Syria. Ahrar al-Sham in particular seems to have a link to Turkey, which facilitates 'safe zones' on the Turkish side of the border in which their 'fixers' can operate. At the start of the conflict, a simple and quick route into Syria was to fly directly to Turkey and then find your way to the border, where 'fixers' from diverse groups were ready to help with contacts and route planning: almost in the same way as taxi drivers in Turkish charter holiday resorts. After arriving in Syria, a British foreign fighter described the simplicity of the route on his Facebook profile: "1 hour flight from Istanbul, 30 min drive from Hatai and bing bang boom ur in!!"<sup>2</sup> As the conflict in Syria has

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<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/Hunada5/status/408958518771716096>.



persisted and in some respects escalated over the Turkish border, monitoring and control have become more intensive, and more foreign fighters are now travelling overland through the Balkans and Greece. Because of the animosity between IS, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, fighters are more dependent than before on the movements' networks during the journey and being able to cross the border between Turkey and Syria before being transported to their destinations.

Jabhat al-Nusra has been more reluctant to integrate new foreign fighters arriving at the Turkish/Syrian border who want to find a way into the movement, and it has generally demanded some form of previous contact and personal references from at least two established members before recruiting a new member. Jabhat al-Nusra has preferred to hand-pick its foreign fighters and therefore it was very dependent on its members' networks and their ability to recruit new foreign fighters. In contrast, IS seems to accept any foreign fighter, even those who do not speak Arabic, do not have previous knowledge about theology or any military training. All the recent converts, opportunists, sadists and adventurers who AQ have wanted to keep out have been welcomed with open arms by IS. Basically, all you have to do is turn up out of the blue and ask IS for a weapon.

In the following, I will review other important differences in how IS, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham perceive the role of the foreign fighter and I will describe the local dilemmas this can entail for the three movements in integrating a high number of foreign fighters. In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra officially left AQ and re-established itself as a local Syrian rebel movement under the new name Jabhat Fath al-Sham. This chapter deals with the time up to this event and it describes some of the reasons the separation was necessary, and how Jabhat Fath al-Sham can be stronger without its association with AQ, while AQ is possibly weaker in its competition with IS.

## **IS**

The percentage of foreign fighters in IS has been estimated from 15 % right up to 80 %, but the most reliable figure is in the middle at around 50 %. Some of them are very high ranking, such as the recently killed Chechenian, Abu Omar al-Shishani, but most are middle ranks and foot soldiers. According to some sources, combat-green foreign fighters comprise the majority of the 8,000-15,000 members of IS who are estimated to have been killed in action or by carrying out suicide attacks, and this indicates that the strategy of admitting flotsam and jetsam as foreign fighters has some logic on the battlefield. Furthermore, foreign fighters in IS have been prominent as the most brutal torturers and executioners in gruesome propaganda videos. The videos profile European foreign fighters in particular as 'prime Westerners' in order to mobilize and recruit in the West, and the Dabiq magazine and other propaganda is very much aimed at European foreign fighters in content and through its choice of the English, French and German languages.

IS's most convincing argument for recruiting foreign fighters is the claim that it is not just an ideological, transnational Jihadi project, but also a real universal holy state, a caliphate, and thus the only legitimate affiliation for *all* of the world's Muslims. However, IS does not just want to unite the *Ummah*,<sup>3</sup> it also wants to wage an offensive and expansive war to conquer the whole world. As the German foreign fighter 'Abu Qatada' (Christian Emde) put it: "We will conquer Europe one day. It is not a question of if we will conquer Europe, just a matter of when that will happen. But it is certain ... for us, there is no such thing as borders. There are only front lines. Our expansion will be perpetual."<sup>4</sup> In this way, IS differs from the way in which Jihadist movements, with AQ at the head, have hitherto legitimized their campaigns of violence as a *defense* of Muslim areas and populations. IS is not on the defensive – it is on the attack.

IS has not just declared war against the non-Muslim part of the world, it has also declared war against Muslims it does not consider as truly faithful, such as Shiites, and Muslims it considers as fallen, which in practice can be anyone who does not recognize the legitimacy of IS as a caliphate and the authority of its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the Caliph of all the faithful. You are with them or against them – either friend or enemy. Therefore, IS does not consider the conflict in Syria as a local and limited civil war. Like other 'provinces' such as Libya, Yemen and Afghanistan/Pakistan, Syria is considered as just one more battlefield, although an important one, in the much broader project to expand the Caliphate.

This narrative about IS as a caliphate defines how recruitment of foreign fighters is designed and it also seems to have some significance for whether it is successful. The flow of foreign fighters to IS began in earnest after 2014, when it declared a caliphate, and in the first edition of *Dabiq* proclaimed that immigration to its territories should therefore be considered as a religious duty. Immigrating to the IS Caliphate would not just mean redemption from sin for all sinners. *Not* immigrating, and by implication preferring to live in the countries of the infidels rather than the Caliphate, would be a deadly sin which, according to IS, will guarantee a place in Hell – "There is no life without Jihad and there is no Jihad without hijrah [immigration]." Those who travel from abroad to fight for IS as a movement are not temporarily 'visiting' in order later to return to their home country. Rather, they automatically become nationals of the Caliphate, with permanent compulsory military service. Leaving the Caliphate is considered desertion and is punished by execution.

The Caliphate is both symbolic and specific. It legitimizes itself through a narrative about IS as a religious entity, a spiritual state of being, a spiritual approach to politics and waging war, and simultaneously a physical state to which foreign fighters are expected to be loyal and to which they are expected to con-

<sup>3</sup> Arabic theological term for the Muslim faith community.

<sup>4</sup> Alex P. Schmid and Judith Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 6, no. 8 (2015), available at <https://doi.org/10.19165/2015.1.08>.

tribute. Therefore, in strict terms, there are no longer *foreign* fighters. Immigration to IS is considered as part of its state-building project and symbolic artefacts such as issuing passports and sealed and stamped official papers are very important. Videos have been circulated of foreign fighters who have disavowed their previous nationalities by burning their burgundy-colored passports and paying homage to the Caliphate in a sort of ceremonial oath of allegiance to IS and the rest of the world be damned. Profiles on the social media reflect an idealized life in complete observance of the edicts of Islam, where sin does not exist, community and meaning are central themes, and where foreign fighters are portrayed as heroes.

As the state-building project is at the hub, recruitment of new citizens also includes other functions than those of the soldier. People who are unfit for military activities are encouraged to join other functions to maintain society, such as administrators, health personnel, builders, IT engineers, media producers, and so on. In his first speech as Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appealed in particular to “the scholars, and callers, especially the judges, as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields.” This opens up for a much larger group of potential immigrants such as women, children and other non-combatants. Foreign fighters are encouraged to take their partners or wives and children with them to IS territories, and single women are encouraged to immigrate alone to be married to Islamic State fighters. Women play a symbolic and practical role in establishing the idea of a society through maintaining families, and it has been estimated that they make up about 10 % of the foreigners who have travelled to IS. It is therefore hard to define exactly what an IS ‘foreign fighter’ actually is. Perhaps he is neither ‘foreign,’ a ‘fighter,’ nor a ‘he.’

However, foreign fighters are not the only citizens in the Caliphate, and the local Iraqi and Syrian IS soldiers do not always show goodwill towards their fellow citizens with foreign origins. On the day they arrive, foreign fighters are awarded privileges such as compensation for having left a more comfortable life to help the Caliphate. For example, soldiers receive more pay at USD 200 compared with the USD 130 paid to locals. Foreign fighters are also housed in enclaves in the best parts of towns like in the Syrian town of Deir Ezzour, where they were allocated houses on nearby hilltops from which they could literally look down on the local population, as a local resident commented in an article in *The Wall Street Journal*: “The Syrians would take the valleys and the foreigners would take the hilltops.”<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of military defeat, there have also been complaints from local IS soldiers that foreign fighters have reproached them without justification, used them as cannon fodder, and not offered them the military support they require. Tensions between local soldiers

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<sup>5</sup> Matt Bradley, “Rift Grows in Islamic State Between Foreign, Local Fighters. Resentments over Different Treatment Erupt into Violence in Syria, Iraq,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2016, accessed January 17, 2017, [www.wsj.com/articles/rift-grows-in-islamic-state-between-foreign-local-fighters-1458930063](http://www.wsj.com/articles/rift-grows-in-islamic-state-between-foreign-local-fighters-1458930063).

and foreign fighters have led to deaths on several occasions, most recently in February when a Dutchman was beaten to death while in detention after having tried to escape from IS. The murder released an exchange of gunfire between foreign fighters and Iraqi IS soldiers in which at least one Iraqi was killed. IS allegedly reacted by arresting up to 70 Dutch foreign fighters and executed eight of them.

### **Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham**

Despite its more exclusive approach to recruitment, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, has said that foreign fighters make up 30 % of the movement. Jabhat al-Nusra managed to attract a critical mass of foreign fighters in the early days of the civil war in Syria in particular, not least because of the strong AQ 'brand.' However, not necessarily all foreign fighters who have joined Jabhat al-Nusra sympathize with AQ's international terrorism. Some of the foreign fighters have joined for solely strategic reasons, because it is the best armed and organized group and it represents the strongest front to simultaneously fight against IS *and* the Assad regime. Its well-trained elite troops fight for a smaller army and they are in sharp contrast to the more improvisational local groups. All Jabhat al-Nusra's foreign fighters complete a tight training program as an introduction to the movement: first, 10 days of religious schooling, then 20 days of physical military training, followed by an exam on the battlefield to test their courage and skills. "We pay a great deal of attention to the individual fighter ... we are concerned with quality, not quantity,"<sup>6</sup> stressed Abu Adnan, a Jabhat al-Nusra militia chief in Aleppo.

Recruitment of foreign fighters for Jabhat al-Nusra has posed a dilemma for the AQ leadership. AQ's overall picture of the conflict is not limited to a specific area. On the contrary, it has a global goal to protect all Muslim areas from Western interference. Jabhat al-Nusra, as a local branch, has had to balance AQ's general defense of Muslims with its own local goal to topple President Assad and introduce an Islamic regime in Syria. A good picture of this balancing exercise is the background of their training videos, in which pictures of President Bashar al-Assad as targets for shooting practice are flanked by the movement's banner with the text "AQ in the Levant: Jabhat al-Nusra." Among other things, this duplicity means that foreign fighters with Jabhat al-Nusra have been able to choose between returning to their home countries after having toppled President Bashar al-Assad, remaining in local branches in Syria, or remaining in AQ's international organization. Although Jabhat al-Nusra believed that it is a Muslim duty to join Jihad wherever possible, they have not considered it their job to enforce this duty (they left this to the individual's con-

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<sup>6</sup> Rania Abouzeid, "Interview with Official of Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's Islamist Militia Group," *Time Magazine*, December 25, 2012, accessed January 17, 2017, <http://world.time.com/2012/12/25/interview-with-a-newly-designated-syrias-jabhat-al-nusra/>.

science) and therefore it has been possible to leave the movement relatively freely.

Duplicity in their focus has also meant that AQ and Jabhat al-Nusra have had to be pragmatic with regard to how they arrange their presence in Syria and their co-existence with local movements such as Ahrar al-Sham. Jabhat al-Nusra has therefore had a strategy drawn up that aims at building up local popularity by supplying a number of services, avoiding civilian targets and sectarian violence, and by refraining from talking about attacks in the West, but instead highlighting the Assad regime as the main enemy. The leader of AQ, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has learnt a lesson from when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi led foreign fighters in Iraq in 2004 and expressed his frustration that the local population would not cooperate or support them. Even at that time, Zawahiri responded with exhortations to limit violence against civilians and Shiites because this invoked resistance against AQ in the local population and led to a drop in new foreign-fighter recruitment.

AQ's strategy in Syria to establish a separate and localized group, Jabhat Fath al-Sham, which prioritizes building up support among the local population and cooperating closely with other Syrian rebel movements, could be an important strategy for its more long-term goal to gain influence in Syria. In this context, it has served AQ well that the international community has decided not to support the rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad, thereby leaving the field open for AQ and its foreign fighters. As a leader of a local rebel group put it: "We don't want AQ here, but if nobody else helps us, we will make an alliance with them."<sup>7</sup> This field of tension between forced necessity and antipathy towards giving AQ's foreign fighters control of the rebellion was also mentioned by another local militia chief, who allowed his group to come under the command of Jabhat al-Nusra: "Fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra is governed by very strict rules issued by the operations command or foreign fighters ... There is no freedom at all, but you do get everything you want."<sup>8</sup> However, not only local rebel groups were absorbed by Jabhat al-Nusra: foreign fighter groups in Syria such as Harakat Sham al-Islam, which was originally led by ex-Guantanamo prisoner, the Tunisian Seraya al-Tuaanisa and the Chechen Jaysh ul-Khilafa have also been recruited as individual militias.

One ally which is important for any rebel group, but particularly crucial for groups with many foreign fighters, is the local population. Even though Jabhat al-Nusra has had the benefit of AQ's bitter experience in Iraq, and has there-

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<sup>7</sup> Carlo Muñoz, "White House officials can't confirm defection of Syrian vice president," *The Hill*, August 18, 2012, accessed January 17, 2017, <http://64.147.104.30/policy/international/244239-white-house-officials-cant-confirm-defection-of-syrian-vice-president>.

<sup>8</sup> Mona Mahmood and Ian Black, "Free Syrian Army rebels defect to Islamist group Jabhat al-Nusra," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2013, accessed January 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/08/free-syrian-army-rebels-defect-islamist-group>.

fore tried to perform civilian service functions such as establishing Sharia courts, their efforts have had a shrill paternalistic tone that has had the complete opposite effect. Social media profiles, especially of young European foreign fighters, reflect how primitive and uneducated they think the local population is, and that they consider themselves as mentors for the local population. An affiliated Jihadist said that: "When the Muhajirun came, they benefited the people in religious knowledge. Sharia academies, courts and schools were opened here, managed by Muhajirun, by brothers in the Jabhat Al Nusrah."<sup>9</sup> However, the large percentage of foreign fighters in the Sharia court staff can just as well be a source of local dissatisfaction as of popularity, if they are interpreted as a lack of local integration in the power infrastructure.

## Ahrar al-Sham

The influence of Ahrar al-Sham on the Syrian rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad is strong enough to enable it ally itself with Jabhat al-Nusra without subjecting itself to Jabhat al-Nusra's command, and this led Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2013 to ask the commander of Ahrar al-Sham in Aleppo at that time, Abu Khaled Al-Suri, to arbitrate in the conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra and IS.

Ahrar al-Sham welcomes most foreign fighters without putting great demands on them, but it reminds recruits that Ahrar al-Sham is neither a caliphate nor an emirate, but a military rebel movement. Foreign fighters are encouraged to come unmarried, therefore, but if they are already married they should bring their wives and children with enough savings to support them for two years (about USD 5,000). Furthermore, they are encouraged to stay with the movement for at least six months and to pay in advance for their stay, preferably one year at a time (about USD 50 per month), in addition to paying for their own weapon (USD 1,500).

These terms are negotiated by a network called al-Muhajirun, which claims to have been established by foreign fighters from a wide spectrum of Islamic rebel movements in Syria. The purpose of the network is to demonstrate an impression of a united Syrian rebellion rather than a rebellion characterized by internal conflict to compete with IS on recruitment of foreign fighters. The 'about us' part of al-Muhajirun's website addresses the division that arose with the conflict between IS and Jabhat al-Nusra and those who go over to the Caliphate are referred to as 'impatient,' 'blind' and 'impulsive'. At the same time, al-Muhajirun adheres to a pan-Islamic criticism of the idea of nationality by referring to the departure country of the foreign fighters as their 'so-called homelands': "After decades, when the gates of Jihad opened up [in Syria], the Muslims came swarming from all over the world ... the Muslims were stricken

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Jihadist Front Established to Represent Foreign Fighters in Syria," *Long War Journal*, July 20, 2015, accessed January 17, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/07/jihadist-front-established-to-represent-foreign-fighters-in-syria.php>.

with disappointment and frustration after witnessing the dissension and confusion that occurred amongst the *mujahideen* [who fight in Jihad] ... some people have left the ranks of the *muhajirun* [emigrants] and the *mujahidun* [same meaning as mujahideen]. Some went to their so-called 'homelands,' while others have been impatient and wanted to continue blindly on their way impulsively."

This coordination has been appropriate for recruiting foreign fighters for whom the narrative about a Muslim community is the fundamental *raison d'être*, and foreign fighters who do not want to risk focusing their energies on internal disputes in the rebellion rather than on the actual enemy, President Assad. Ahrar al-Sham is a local rebel group that sees itself as primarily engaged in a specific, geographically delimited conflict that is about toppling Bashar al-Assad's regime and introducing an Islamic regime instead. However, Ahrar al-Sham also subscribes to the idea of a religious community stretching beyond Syrian borders. This raises the narrative about the civil war in Syria above secular politics and power struggles and makes it a question of Jihad for an Islamic regime. Although, in contrast to the Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham does not claim that Jihad in Syria is the *duty* of every Muslim, it does claim that the Syrian conflict is a matter for every Muslim because fundamentally it is about Muslim concerns. This is an important message in recruiting foreign fighters, because it says that, although you come here as a foreign fighter, we do not consider you as 'foreign' to the conflict.

### Jihad's dilemmas

The widespread contempt for local culture and traditions among European IS foreign fighters, combined with local frustration about their privileged position, shows the large number of foreign fighters as a potential Achilles heel for IS. IS risks the local population seeing it as a new occupation force, with the foreign fighters as colonizing armies. For example, IS's so-called 'morality police' patrol the streets and come down hard on everyone, especially women and the elderly, who fails to meet their strict requirements for correct appearance or behavior. One resident in Mosul described in *The Wall Street Journal* what has become an ordinary scene from the local market, where a foreign fighter scolded an elderly Iraqi man for, in his opinion, having a too short beard for a truly faithful Muslim. The elderly man felt that his honor was being maligned by being talked to so demeaningly by a younger person, and shocked others at the market, for whom such humiliation had become an everyday experience, by answering back with oaths and swearing. However, what is more surprising and interesting is that six local IS soldiers who also observed the slanging match, took the side of the old man, clapped the foreign fighter in handcuffs, and drove him away in a car. This reflects an important dilemma for IS: It recruits foreign fighters on the basis of the higher position and relatively free rein with regard to violence they will have in the Caliphate. At the same time IS has to find a cultural sensitivity if it is not to be the object of hate from the local pop-



ulation, and it has to quell the internal dispute between its foreign fighters and the local soldiers who also pose a threat to the movement's cohesiveness. Perhaps the 59 countries in the coalition against IS can make do with just arming themselves with patience while the internal disputes tear the movement apart and dissolve any local support there may be at the moment.

Despite the fact that Jabhat al-Nusra has in contrast had the benefit of AQ's harsh lesson on the importance of building alliances with the local rebel groups and support from the local population, focus on a moderate and pragmatic line, however, has also caused internal conflicts, which ultimately have probably contributed to the dissolution of the affiliation with AQ. Powerful conservative forces have not wanted to compromise on their ideology and have moved towards the much more compromiseless profile of IS. AQ's strong 'brand' has been crucial in attracting foreign fighters, especially in competition with IS, but it has been difficult for AQ to profile the fighting in Syria as having something bigger and more holy at stake than nationalism. Pan-Islamic Jihadists would never sacrifice their lives in a struggle about nothing more than secular state power. In an attempt to resolve this dilemma and compete with the attraction of the Caliphate proclaimed by IS, Abu Mohammad al-Julani has therefore declared on several occasions that Jabhat al-Nusra will work towards establishing an Islamic Emirate in Syria. Like the Caliphate, foreign fighters will also be able to immigrate more formally<sup>10</sup> to an emirate, although an emirate will be very different from a caliphate as it will only apply to the territory it controls, i.e. it does not have the universal nature of a caliphate. On the other hand, the idea of an emirate created a new dilemma for Jabhat al-Nusra, as the local rebel movements were afraid of losing control over their lands and suddenly finding themselves living in an AQ state, just as isolated and condemned as Taliban's Afghanistan or the Hamas government in Gaza. Yet again, for Jabhat al-Nusra it was a case of 'damned if you do, damned if you don't.' The only solution to the dilemma has been to take the final step to remove AQ from the equation and to re-establish itself as a Syrian rebel movement that can become the organizational base of the Emirate.

At the same time, the establishment of Jabhat Fath al-Sham also makes the strategically crucial alliance with Ahrar al-Sham significantly less contentious. Ahrar al-Sham's dilemma has been the exact opposite of Jabhat al-Nusra's: Strategically it has been wise for Ahrar al-Sham to downplay its connection with AQ towards the international community in order to keep the door open for donations and support, and although the group uses the term Jihad and is planning to introduce Islamic rule at the more conservative end of the scale, the 'West' is not considered an enemy. Ahrar al-Sham has interests in representing a semi-legitimate face of the Islamist element of the rebellion against Bashar al-Assad which it shares with the international community. Most recently in 2016, the UN decided that Ahrar al-Sham should not be included on its

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<sup>10</sup> What has become known by its theological term as *hijra*.



list of designated terrorist groups in order to keep open the possibility of bringing it into play as a political negotiation partner. However, Ahrar al-Sham has had to maintain this interest at the same time as having a military strategic alliance with Jabhat al-Nusra, whose parent organization, AQ, shared a place with IS as the West's enemy number one. Special forces from Jabhat al-Nusra remain intact with the establishment of Jabhat Fath al-Sham and they are an important supplement to the foot soldiers of Ahrar al-Sham and it makes great sense for Ahrar al-Sham to highlight this alliance in order to recruit potential foreign fighters. On the other hand, the establishment of Jabhat Fath al-Sham reinforces the duplicity that characterizes Ahrar al-Sham, and foreign fighters will also demand a reply from Jabhat Fath al-Sham to the decisive question they have hitherto posed to Ahrar al-Sham: is their fight in Syria a fight for freedom or a pan-Islamist Jihad?

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Research Article

## Migrants, Housewives, Warriors or Sex Slaves: AQ's and the Islamic State's Perspectives on Women

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**Abstract:** Why do young Muslim women from the whole world join the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, despite the fact that the group is notorious for conducting terrible sexual violations against women? Through comparing how al-Qaeda (AQ) and IS are positioning women in their ideological literature, this article sheds light on IS' appeal to women. This is interesting, as AQ in a historical perspective only attracted a handful of European women to physically join the group. The comparison highlights that AQ and IS position women in different ways: as housewives, migrants, warriors and sex slaves. Both groups' ideologies agree that a woman's primarily role is to be a housewife and mother, and exclude in principle women from the battlefield. However, only IS is emphasizing that Muslim women have a right and duty to migrate to its territory. Through using ideological arguments in its literature, IS convinces its supporters that it is a religious duty to enslave women the group defines as idolaters. For this reason, IS' brutality against non-Muslim women will not discourage its female supporters from joining the group.

**Keywords:** Islamic State, AQ, women, migrants, sex slaves, house wives, warriors.

### Introduction

Although the global media report about terrible sexual violations against women committed by the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, young women from the whole world are travelling to these countries to join the group. After their arrival most women marry an IS fighter and spend their time as housewives. Never in a historical perspective have so many Muslim women,

originally from Europe, travelled to the Middle East to join a militant Islamist group. In order to understand why IS as a movement attracts European women to join the group, while we at the same time hear terrible stories about IS' sex slaves, I will in this article analyze how IS positions women in their ideological literature. As AQ historically has recruited only a handful of European women, it is interesting to analyze the differences and similarities between the two movements' perspectives on women. I use magazines and ideological writings, published by IS and AQ. I will especially focus on *Inspire*, a magazine which is closely connected to AQ in the Arabian Peninsula, and then the magazine *Risalah*, which at the time of publication was connected to AQ's affiliation in Syria, the Nusrah-front. The Nusrah-front later broke this affiliation and changed name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Lastly, I focus on IS' magazine *Dabiq*. I will especially focus on the four different roles IS and AQ ascribe to women in their literature. These roles are as migrants, housewives, warriors or sex slaves.

As a point of departure, it is important to mention that media often describe the women travelling to Syria to join IS as "jihadi-brides," "brainwashed" and lured. This gives a simplified picture of women's motivation to join the organization and fits with a Western stereotypical picture of the oppressed Muslim woman. Although I will not look closer at the women's motivations in this article, it is essential to note that women always have played an active role in militant Islamist groups in the Middle East.

Historical examples of Muslim women participating in war go back to the time of Mohammed and his successors. For instance, Mohammed's wife Aisha led the so-called "Battle of the Camel" and his granddaughter Zaynab Bint Ali fought in the battle of Karbala.<sup>1</sup> Women fought with Mohammed and his successors through leading male fighters, encouraging men to fight or through providing medical care.<sup>2</sup> In the last decade, women have obtained a new role in militant Islamist groups, especially through committing suicide attacks. We have seen this especially in Palestine, Chechnya and Iraq.

It is also not new that women leave Europe to join militant Islamist groups in the Middle East. A handful of European women were recruited during the mid-2000s to join AQ in Iraq. The most famous example is the Belgian convert, Muriel Degauque, who conducted a suicide attack in Iraq in November 2005. Less known is that towards the end of the 2000s, hundreds of Germans, including a significant amount of women, emigrated to Waziristan, the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan to participate in the conflict in Afghani-

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<sup>1</sup> Farhana Ali, "Rocking the Cradle to Rocking the World: The Role of Muslim Female Fighters," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8, no. 1 (11 January 2013): 21–35.

<sup>2</sup> David Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (1 September 2005), 375.

stan and at the same time establish a colony.<sup>3</sup> In this colony whole families lived and fulfilled their dreams about a better Islamic society. However, many were disappointed and in 2012 there were several media reports telling that these people returned to Germany.<sup>4</sup>

## Women as Migrants

The first role IS ascribes to women in its literature is as migrants. IS has launched a comprehensive campaign to encourage women to conduct *hijrah* – migration to its territory. In AQ's literature, there is a continuous theme that women should encourage the man to conduct *hijrah* and *jihad*, armed combat for the Sake of God, and not prevent his travel. However, she shall herself remain at home.

On July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, a speech of the IS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was broadcast publicly. In this speech he encouraged Muslims from the whole world to conduct *hijrah*, i.e. to emigrate to the territories of the Islamic State. He said it was a duty. On social media, English-speaking women in the IS territory use the term "*muhajirah*," the Arabic word for migrant, about themselves. They say that they conducted *hijrah* to the Islamic State, something which has an important symbolical meaning for IS in its ideology. *Hijrah* also indicates the travel, which Mohammed and his companions conducted from Mecca to Medina in the year of 622. Muslims perceive *hijrah* as a turning point both for the development of Islam and for the world history. In this context, their use of the word *muhajirah* shows symbolically that the women perceive themselves to be essential for the future of Islam, since they emigrated to the IS territory to contribute to rebuilding the Islamic Caliphate.

In order to recruit women, IS has revolutionized jihadi organizations' use of propaganda directed towards women. The propaganda campaign is to some extent taking place in IS' own ideological writings. However, it especially takes place on social media, for instance on Tumblr and Twitter. From the 7<sup>th</sup> issue of the IS' propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, there is an own section called "To our Sisters." This section discusses female migration and the life of women in the IS' territory. For instance, Hayat Boumeddiene, widow of Amedy Coulibaly, who killed four hostages during the attacks in a Paris Jewish Kosher shop in 2015, tells about her migration to the IS' territory in Syria.<sup>5</sup> She tells about how pleased she is to live in the Caliphate. In 2014, the first blogs were written by

<sup>3</sup> Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, "Jeg En Stat Mig Bygge Vil," in *Terrorisme Og Trusselsvurderinger*, ed. Lars Erslev Andersen (København: Dansk Institut for Internationale Studier, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Özlem Gezer and Holger Stark, "Disillusioned German Islamists Returning Home to Germany," *Spiegel Online*, July 18, 2012, available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/disillusioned-german-islamists-returning-home-to-germany-a-844799.html> (accessed March 23, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> "A Brief Interview with Umm Basir Al-Muhajirah," *Dabiq*, no. 7 (February 2015): 50–51.

women, who allegedly live in the IS' territory. One example is the now blocked blog "*Diary of a Muhajirah*," where a woman allegedly from Malaysia tells about how women can travel to Syria, what they need to bring and she answers the readers' questions. The blog glorified the life under IS. In addition, many women claiming to live in the IS territory are present on Twitter, where they give a picture of their new life. In an attempt to prevent IS' recruitment on social media, Twitter is trying to block the women's accounts. However, new accounts always pop up again. Encrypted chat services, such as Telegram, are therefore playing increasingly important roles. Through this channel women in Europe are getting in touch with people in the IS' territory, where they receive information about how to travel to the area. Allegedly, a large group of European women is gathering daily in a house in Raqqa, where through Internet they attempt to recruit women.

In AQ's literature, the topic of women as migrants is almost absent. None of AQ's *Inspire* magazines discuss women as migrants. This is despite the fact that the magazines contain interviews with men, who have conducted *hijrah* for instance from Europe to Yemen and who encourage other men to emigrate. AQ emphasizes in their written material that *jihad*, armed battle and *hijrah* are primarily for men. However, as previously mentioned, a handful of women travelled from Europe to Iraq in the mid-2000s to join AQ. With the exception of the Belgian suicide bomber, Muriel Degauque, the details around these people's travels are unknown. In AQ's female magazine *al-Shamikha* from 2011, a widow after a Jihadi-fighter tells that she and her children did not travel with her husband to the war. She argued that it is impossible to bring children and women before the husband knows whether it is possible for them to travel.<sup>6</sup> There is only one article about female migrants in AQ's magazines. This is in the magazine *al-Risalah* from 2015, which at the time of publication belonged to AQ's Syrian affiliation, the Nusrah-front.

Um Asiya Muhajirah writes about her *hijrah* from England to Bilad as-Sham.<sup>7</sup> This term, as-Sham, in general is used to describe greater Syria and also includes parts of Jordan and Lebanon. The woman tells that she is a convert, widow after a martyr and the mother of three children. She explains that she emigrated to "as-Sham" to live together with Muslims, and to distance herself and her family from the infidels, "*kuffar*." One of the reasons why the Nusrah-front published this article was because they wanted to compete with IS about attracting male supporters. The article further shows the differences between IS and AQ. The woman discussed in the magazine emigrated to as-Sham. This does not necessarily mean Syria. She says it was because she wanted to live among Muslims. This shows that the Nusrah-front, in contrast to IS, does not have anything to offer women. There are strong indications that the Nusrah-front does not want women to join the group in Syria. There is no structure to

<sup>6</sup> "Interview with a Fighter's Wife – 'The Lofty Woman'," *Al-Shamikha* 1 (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Umm Asiya Muhajirah, "Hijra – My Story," *Al-Risalah* 1 (July 2015).

host women or children, and women do not have a function in the insurgency war the Nusrah-front is conducting. Marriages will make the men attached to an area. This will make the war the Nusrah-front is conducting against Assad's regime more difficult. While since 2013 a large amount of women from the whole world have travelled to Syria to become a part of IS, there are no famous examples of women, who have travelled to Syria and other countries to join AQ affiliated groups the last years.

IS' campaign to recruit women has given results. Different estimates show that at least 10 per cent of the people travelling to join IS in Syria and Iraq from Western countries are women. This applies for instance to Scandinavia. From some countries, such as France and England, the numbers are higher. The women have travelled either with their husbands, another family member or a friend and several have brought their young children.

Women's roles as migrants are being positioned differently by IS and AQ. IS wants women to immigrate to their territory and spend many resources to achieve this goal. If women immigrate to the IS' territory, they have the possibility to contribute building a new Utopian society, the new Islamic Caliphate. This has been a dream for many Muslims since the end of the Islamic Golden Age in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Neither in Syria nor in other countries AQ is paying attention to women's role as migrants. Foreign women do not have any function in the Nusrah-front's territory in Syria. The role IS is attributing to women should not be underestimated in order to understand why IS is able to attract European women. For the first time in centuries, women have the possibility to play an important role to achieve the dream about building a caliphate.

## **Women as Housewives**

Although AQ does not encourage women to immigrate to its territory, women are given an important role to achieve the organization's goal: as a virtuous housewife, who encourages and supports her husband to participate in *jihad* and who raises her children well, so that they in the future will fight for the cause of God. This view is shared by IS. The ideological works of IS and AQ show that both organizations claim that women primarily should play a role in the house as a good housewife. Women do not necessarily agree about this role, and the role of women in AQ has during the last decades been a topic of discussion in the organization.

Leading AQ clerks have discussed the role of the women several times. In a *fatwa*, a religious declaration from 1996, Bin Laden is emphasizing that women play an important role as supporters, facilitators and, not the least, when they encourage their men and sons to conduct *jihad*.

Bin Laden writes:

Our women had set a tremendous example of generosity in the cause of Allah; they motivated and encouraged their sons, brothers and husbands to

fight—in the cause of Allah—in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechenia and in other countries.<sup>8</sup>

In 2008, Ayman al-Zawahiri, AQ's present leader, said in a radiobroadcast that the role of women in *jihad* is limited to taking care of the home, and that women do not play a role in the global *jihad*.<sup>9</sup> Rather, he claimed that the successful battle depends on non-military support from women, for instance through encouraging family members to participate in battles, as mothers of the new generation and as wives of the male fighters. Female AQ supporters disagreed with al-Zawahiri's perception that the role of women was limited to the house. Lengthy discussions about his statement followed on Jihadi internet fora.<sup>10</sup> Female jihadi-supporters were disappointed and hurt that they were not allowed to fight in the same way as the men. This shows an initial women's liberation movement in AQ, where the younger generation of women disagreed with the older generation of clerks in the movement. As a reaction to the disagreements, al-Zawahiri's wife, Umayma Hassan Ahmed Muhammad Hassan published in 2009 an open letter to the Muslim sisters, where she supported her husbands' view that women's main role is to be good wives, support their husbands and to raise the new generations of warriors.<sup>11</sup> However, Umayma also answered directly that women can participate in battles, even in martyr operations. In June 2012, Umayma Hassan published a new letter, where she appealed to the Muslim sisters after the revolutions in the Middle East. She recommends the "sisters" to raise their sons to love *jihad* and martyrdom without mentioning fighting.

This perspective on the women's role is continuously repeated in newer works by AQ and is being discussed several times in the magazine *Inspire*. Again, women's role is reduced to sending their husbands and sons to conduct *jihad* for the global Muslim society, the *Ummah*. The examples show that the role of the women is an important topic of discussion for AQ. Despite the debates, there is no doubt that the role of the women primarily is to be at home.

IS' ideological works show that the movement has the same perspective on the role of women as AQ. Their role is limited to the home, through being a good wife and a good mother. In the 12<sup>th</sup> issue of *Dabiq*, Umm Summayah al-Muhajirah writes that women conduct *jihad*, when she patiently waits for her

<sup>8</sup> "Bin Laden's Fatwa," *PBS NewsHour*, available at [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-july-dec96-fatwa\\_1996/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-july-dec96-fatwa_1996/) (accessed 29 March 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: The Many Faces of Women Terrorists* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2011); Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, "Kønskamp i Al-Qaida," *Kvinden Og Samfundet* 127, no. 1 (May 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Hemmingsen, "Kønskamp i Al-Qaida."

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Dickey, "The Shadowland Journal: Zawahiri's Wife's Letter," available at <http://christopherdickey.blogspot.com/2010/01/zawahiris-wifes-letter.html> (accessed 23 March 2016).



husband to return from the war, prays for him and raises his children.<sup>12</sup> A woman can only fight if she herself is being attacked. Al-Muhajirah emphasizes that the role of women is to contribute to building the new *Ummah* through producing men and sending them to war. The article argues that this is just as important as actively participating in war. It further states that a woman's weapon is good behavior and knowledge about religion. In order to have enough religious knowledge to be able to raise the children in a suitable manner, *Dabiq* recommends that women join one of the many courses offered by IS about the Islamic Jurisprudence, *Sharia*.

On social media women describe the life as housewives in the IS' territory. When women arrive to the territory, they are placed in an all-female residence house, called "al-maqqar." It is expected that they marry an IS-fighter. After they have been married, they spend their daily life making food, learning Arabic and being together with other migrants. A woman is only allowed to leave her home, if she is together with her protector, a *Mahram*, a male relative or her husband. In an article in *Dabiq* 13, IS explains that if the woman should be widowed, she has to fulfill the mourning period, named *Iddah*, lasting four months and ten days.<sup>13</sup> When the *Iddah* period has passed, it is expected that she should end her time of grieving. It is written indirectly that she is supposed to remarry.

The role of women is being discussed in the document "Women in the Islamic State," which was published on Jihadi internet fora in January 2015.<sup>14</sup> The manifest states that it is not an official document of IS, but that it is made by supporters in al-Khanassa brigade. This is the name of IS all-female morality police. The document emphasizes that the role of women lies primarily in the home, which starts when she marries. Marriages are allowed after a girl is nine-years old. As it is necessary to have some knowledge to be a good mother, the document is introducing mandatory education for girls between seven and 15-years old. There are only a few exceptions where women are allowed to play a role outside the home: if she is studying theology, if she is a female doctor or teacher, or if a fatwa is issued, allowing women to participate in *Jihad*. This is only allowed if there are not enough men to defend the country against the attack of the enemy. Interestingly, the document suggests a system for taking care of the children, if the mother has to work.

IS and AQ share the perspective about a woman's role as a housewife. Both believe that the primary task of women is to be at home, marry, give birth to children and raise their sons to fight for the sake of Allah. She also needs to have a great knowledge about religion, as she is responsible for passing on this

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<sup>12</sup> Umm Summayyah al-Muhajirah, "Two, Three or Four," *Dabiq* (12 November 2015): 19–22.

<sup>13</sup> "Advice on Ihdad," *Dabiq* (13 January 2016): 24–26.

<sup>14</sup> Charlie Winter, *Women of the Islamic State* (London: Quilliam Foundation, February 2015), available at <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf>, accessed March 29, 2016.

knowledge to her children. In this way they will be willing to use weapons to promote their religion.

## Female Warriors

Occasionally women in the IS' territory publish photos of themselves on social media with a Kalashnikov in their hands. This gives a misleading picture. As the last section showed, women in IS have a limited role in fighting. AQ's ideology also excludes women from participating in operative fighting. However, there are historical exceptions.

Although women do not play a role in operative combat in IS, non-married women work in the all-female brigade al-Ketibet al-Khanassa, a part of IS' morality police al-Hisbah. This occurs in big cities such as Raqqa in Syria. The name al-Khanassa is not random. Al-Khanassa was an Arabic poet in the 7th century, who became a Muslim. In her poems she glorified the death of her brother in battle and encouraged all her sons to fight *Jihad*. When they were killed, she stated that she would not mourn, but celebrate their martyrdom. The women in the morality police receive one month of training, for instance to learn handling weapons. Interestingly, this brigade is not being discussed in the ideological literature of IS. According to statements to media from former female members of the group, its task is to secure that the women in Raqqa cover in public, that they do not use high-heeled shoes and that they are in the company of a man. It is also being reported that they have a special role to be guardian over new women arriving to the territory.

Although AQ's ideology excludes women from operative combat, there are examples of local adjustments. During the command of AQ's leader in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, women started to conduct suicide attacks. The example is interesting, because AQ in Iraq was the predecessor to today's IS. Women conducted suicide attacks for AQ between 2005 and 2010, where most of the attacks were conducted in 2008.<sup>15</sup> At this time, one sixth of all the attacks were conducted by women. A review of the women's biographies shows that many of them were widows of killed AQ fighters in Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Their wish for revenge, economic difficulties or traumas were likely reasons for their recruitment.

There are several explanations for why AQ in Iraq allowed female suicide bombers, even though that disputes the group's ideology. An explanation can be found with AQ's former leader in Iraq, al-Zarqawi, who stated that "War has broken out ... if you (Muslim men) are not going to be chivalrous knights in this

<sup>15</sup> Jessica Davis, "Evolution of the Global Jihad: Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 4 (12 March 2013): 279–91; Mohammed Hafez, "Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq: How Jihadists Frame Suicide Terrorism in Videos and Biographies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 1 (January 2007): 95–115; Anne Speckhard, "Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq," *Democracy and Security* 5, no. 1 (16 March 2009): 19–50.

<sup>16</sup> Speckhard, "Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq."

war (fursan al-harb), make way for women to wage it. ... Yes, by God, men have lost their manhood.”<sup>17</sup>

This could have been a way to encourage men who had not yet taken up arms to fight. It is also important to mention that 2008 was the top year for employment of female suicide bombers in Iraq. This was two years after American bombs killed al-Zarqawi, and the movement was facing several challenges. Its new leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who is not the same person as the present IS' leader, attempted but failed to continue al-Zarqawi's state building project. The group faced economic difficulties, and foreign fighters who previously had conducted several suicide attacks had stopped arriving to the territory due to a better control of the Syrian-Iraqi border. In addition to this, stronger measures were taken to counter AQ's fighters and suicide bombers in Iraq. Under these conditions, it became easier for women to conduct suicide attacks, as women traditionally were not under suspicion. Women were never introduced into the leadership structure of AQ.<sup>18</sup> After 2010, there are no examples of female suicide bombers in Iraq. The explanations are complex and must be seen in relation to a changing nature of the conflict. This was caused by the gradual reduction of US presence in the country that formally ended in 2011.

IS in Syria and Iraq, which arises from AQ in Iraq, has not employed women as suicide bombers. It is necessary to mention that there are exceptions in other IS' provinces. Women are conducting suicide attacks for Boko Haram in Nigeria, which now has declared their affiliation to IS. The reason why IS in Syria and Iraq does not use female suicide bombers is likely that the primary role of women in IS is to contribute to building the new caliphate by raising the new generation of children. Both social media and interviews in media show that foreign fighters are frustrated due to a lack of women. Marriages between foreign fighters and Syrians are occurring. It is reported that Syrian women are often forced into these marriages.<sup>19</sup> IS wishes that foreign fighters marry Syrians to mix with the local population and to get a local affiliation to the area. European foreign fighters in Syria are however preferring to marry European women, something which partially explain IS' extensive recruitment of foreign women. As the number of foreign women is so low, women will contribute more to build the caliphate as a whole through marrying an IS fighter and to give birth to his child, rather than dying in armed battle.

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<sup>17</sup> Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (20 October 2014): 780–802.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, "Palestine, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan: Internationalization and Localization," *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 113–49.

<sup>19</sup> Abu Mohammed, "Ghost of Marriage from ISIS Militants Frightens Women ... Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently," February 16, 2015, available at <http://www.raqqa-sl.co/en/?p=576> (accessed March 29, 2016).

Although IS does not employ female suicide bombers, they acknowledge women who conduct this. An interesting example is the San Bernardino attack in California in the US. The IS magazine *Dabiq* glorifies Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, who conducted the attack which killed 14 people.<sup>20</sup> *Dabiq* tells that the attack was unique, because Malik conducted it together with his wife, despite that *Jihad* is not mandatory for her. The magazine argues that the wife did not wish to lose the possibility for *shahadah*, to become a martyr. Despite that the wife from other sources is described as the driving force behind the attack, *Dabiq* reduces her role to a person following her husband.

The ideological writings of AQ also glorify women who have taken up arms for the sake of Allah. They use this as an appeal to Muslim men to do the same. For instance, the magazine *Inspire* mentions the American convert LaRose, nick named "*Jihad Jane*," who was arrested in 2009 and accused of planning to assassinate the Swedish artist Lars Vilks. The magazine also mentions the British woman Roshonara Choudhry who attacked the British Member of Parliament Stephen Timms in 2010. Choudhry is mentioned in the fourth publication of the magazine *Inspire* as an appeal to Muslim men:

A woman has shown to the Ummah's men the path of jihad! A woman my brothers! Shame on all the men for sitting on their hands while one of our women has taken up the individual jihad! She felt the need to do it simply because our men gave all too many excuses to refrain from it.<sup>21</sup>

Despite that women are essentially excluded from fighting, both by AQ and IS, different needs can open up for local adjustments. This is especially apparent with IS predecessor, AQ in Iraq, where women played an important role as suicide bombers. AQ does not condemn women who conduct attacks on their own. However, they use it in their ideological writings as a call for men to do the same. Presently women can better fulfill the goal of the caliphate through being housewives and giving birth to new citizens, rather than being fighters. Although IS does not wish that women should fight, the example with Tashfeen Malik shows that they acknowledge women who take up arms to advance the case of the *Ummah*. It is therefore likely—should the needs of IS change in the future—that they will be willing to allow women to participate in combat.

## Women as Sex Slaves

IS has become notorious for enslaving women they define as idolaters and infidels as sex slaves. This has especially hurt the Kurdish minority group, the Yazidis. There is no similar example from AQ, neither from an ideological perspective or historical examples. The topic is totally absent in the ideological

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<sup>20</sup> "Foreword," *Dabiq* (13 January 2016): 3–4.

<sup>21</sup> Muhammed al-Sana'ani, "Choudhry and Taimour – Followers of the Borderless Loyalty," *Inspire* 4 (2010).

writings of AQ. However, they do also not condemn it. This is interesting, because AQ in its ideological writings often criticizes IS' brutality. IS explains carefully in their ideological writings why it is legal according to the Islamic law, *sharia*, to enslave women.

In August 2014, IS attacked the Sinjar mountain in Iraq and enslaved thousands of Yazidi women. The Yazidis believe in one God and seven angels, who are ruled by the angel Melek Taus. Several Christian and Muslim groups call the Yazidis "devil worshipers" because their teaching about Malik Taus has similarities with Islamic and Christian traditions about the devil. Eyewitness accounts from the Yazidi women who have escaped from IS show that IS either gave the women away as gifts to local or foreign IS fighters or systematically sold them.<sup>22</sup> Local IS commanders instructed the IS' fighters to inspect and choose the women to "marriage." The women were then forced to marry fighters, where they experienced brutal sexual abuse.

*Dabiq* has published two articles where IS, with references to religious writings, explains why it was a religious duty to enslave the Yazidis. The first text argues that the Sharia students of the caliphate have decided that the Yazidis are *mushrikin*, idolaters.<sup>23</sup> They are quoting the Quran, which tells that *mushrikin* either should be killed or taken capture. The text argues that Muslims will be responsible for their lacking ability to kill the idolaters, primarily the men, on the Day of the Judgement. The women on the other hand are supposed to be enslaved. Slavery, especially if a slave woman gives birth to her owner's child, is one of the signs that the Day of the Judgement is approaching. Apocalyptic stories, signs on the end of the world, are in general an important part of IS' ideology. Several famous Islamic theologians, among them Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, are quoted to explain that if women give birth to their owner's child, then the child will become free and obtain the same status as his father. The slavery is therefore a way to exterminate the Yazidis and ensure that their offspring born in slavery become true Muslim believers. It is essential to mention that several witness accounts indicate that the Yazidi women have been forced to take contraceptives to avoid pregnancy. This shows a difference in IS' ideological perspectives and what is actually taking place.

*Dabiq* argues that the absence of slavery in the present world has caused men to commit sins. Men who do not have the possibility to marry are encircled by temptations. If a man enslaves a woman as a concubine, the relationship becomes legal. The article concludes that slavery is an important aspect of the *law of Sharia*. The once not supporting this do not recognize the *law of Sharia* and in this way, they are apostate from Islam. A second article in *Dabiq*

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<sup>22</sup> UNHRC, *Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Human Rights Situation in Iraq in the Light of Abuses Committed by the so-Called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and Associated Groups* A/HRC/28/1 (13 March 2015).

<sup>23</sup> "The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour," *Dabiq* 4 (October 2014): 14–17, available at <http://www.danielpipes.org/rr/2014-10-dabiq.228.pdf> (accessed October 26, 2016).

tries to convince the reader that *Saby*, enslaving infidels through war, is the only right way.<sup>24</sup> This is likely in order to answer the massive critique the group has received caused by the female slaves, also from IS' own supporters. *Dabiq* refers to the media sources of the Kuffar, which call the slavery rape. Through not defining what IS means by "kuffar," they open up for enslaving all prisoners of war. The magazine argues that important historical figures in Islam, for instance the Prophet Mohammed, enslaved women as concubines. They also claim that slave-women possess some rights, for instance it is illegal to separate a child from the mother. *Dabiq* argues that the main reason for enslaving women is to save them from infidelity and they wish that the women should find the right Islam. They mention several examples of Yazidi women who have converted. This is therefore a way to expand Islam as a religion and to exterminate the worshippers of the devil.

Through using theological arguments, IS can convince its audience that they serve the cause of God through enslaving the Yazidi women. The slavery will not strike the European Muslim female IS recruits, because they are true Muslims. It is illegal to enslave Muslims. IS' way of depicting Yazidi women as the slave master's property likely attracts men to the group, who do not have economical possibilities to marry in the normal way.

### **AQ and the Islamic State's Perspectives on Women**

This article has compared the way IS and AQ position women in their ideological writings. Both movements share the perspective that women's main task is to be a good housewife, who is supposed to support her husband in armed Jihad and raise her sons in the faith. In this way he will be willing to fight to advance the case of Islam. However, AQ and IS have different perspectives on women as migrants. In contrast to IS, which emphasizes that women have both a duty and right to be a migrant, AQ claims that migration is a man's task. For IS, female migrants play an essential role in the group's territorial state building project.

None of the movements essentially wish that women should play a role as fighters. However, there are exceptions. In their propaganda materials, both movements have glorified women who have conducted terror attacks. However, they both emphasize that *Jihad* is not mandatory for women. Female terror attacks are used as an incitement for men to conduct the same. AQ in Iraq also employed female suicide bombers during a time-period when the movement was deeply weakened and women had other possibilities to conduct attacks comparing to men. This shows that the ideology of AQ, which originally forbids women from taking part in combat, is willing and able to adjust to local needs. Despite that AQ in Iraq was the predecessor to today's IS, there are no examples of female IS suicide bombers in Syria and Iraq. Neither are there ex-

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<sup>24</sup> Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, "Slave Girls or Prostitutes," *Dabiq* 9 (May-June 2015): 44-49.

amples that women in the IS territory play a role in operative fighting. However, non-married women participate in IS' morality police. An explanation for this is that presently women serve IS' fight best through contributing to building the new caliphate as wives and mothers. This need can change in the future, if IS loses its territorial foothold in Syria and Iraq. It can open up for women in the future serving the caliphate best through, for instance, being suicide bombers.

The greatest difference between IS and AQ is the man's right to enslave women. While IS uses theological arguments to defend that it is correct to enslave women they define as infidels, AQ is not mentioning the topic. In its propaganda materials, IS emphasizes that slavery is an important principle of the Sharia law. The stories about female sex slaves undoubtedly play an important role in IS' own recruitment strategy. IS' positioning of women as potential slaves does therefore not necessarily conflict with women's role as a virtuous wife. The goal with both roles is that women give birth to new inhabitants of the caliphate, and that the caliphate expands.

By positioning the Yazidis as devil worshippers, which good Muslims according to IS' ideology have a duty to eradicate, IS can convince its supporters that it is important to enslave them. A female Yazidi slave will hopefully convert and her children will become Muslims. In this way, IS will be able to exterminate devil worshippers. This message is reinforced by that female slaves also play a part in IS' apocalyptic stories about the Day of the Judgement. However, a good Sunni Muslim woman can only play the virtuous housewife role. It is illegal to enslave a Muslim woman. It is the woman's duty as a good Muslim to emigrate to the caliphate, where she is given an important role in building up the new Utopian society. These factors explain why European Muslim women voluntarily choose to join IS, a group feared for committing brutal sexual violations against women.

## **About the Author**

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